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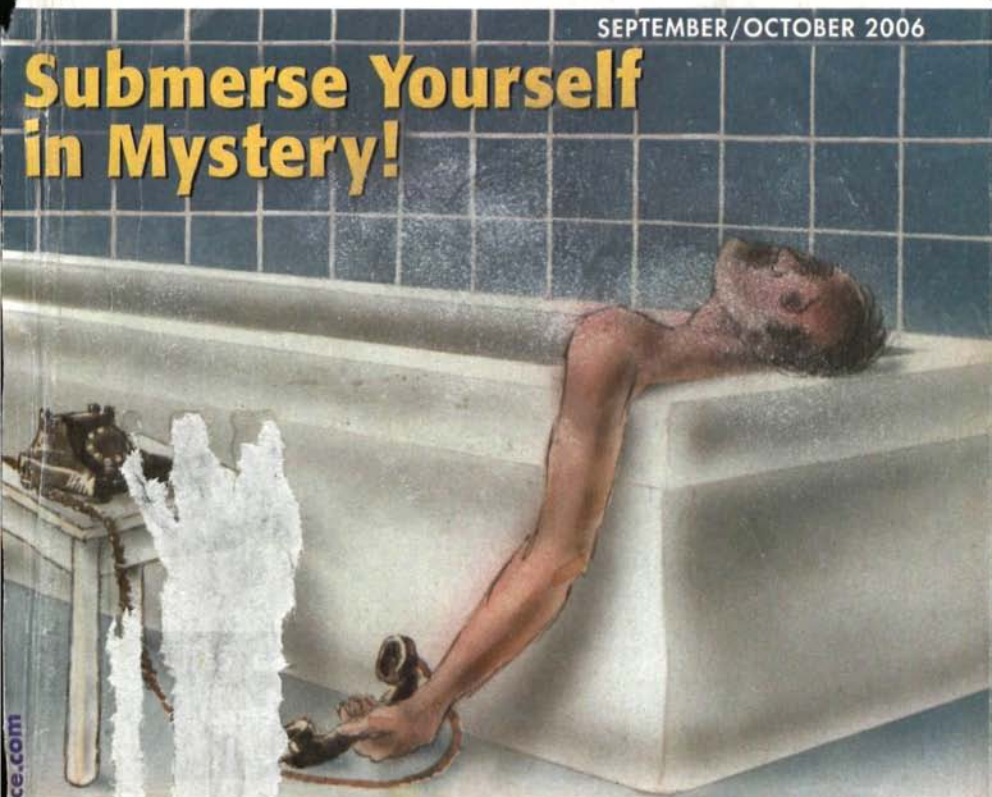

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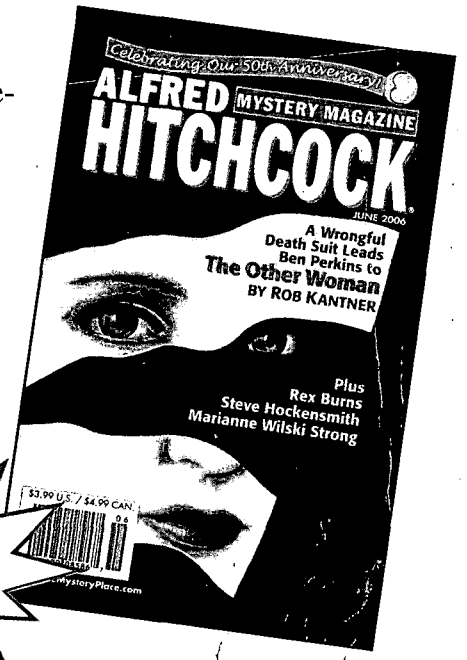

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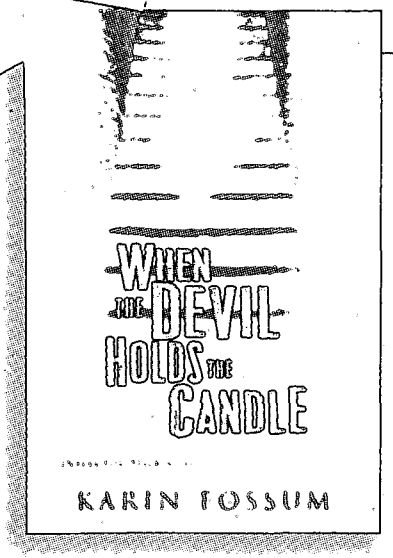

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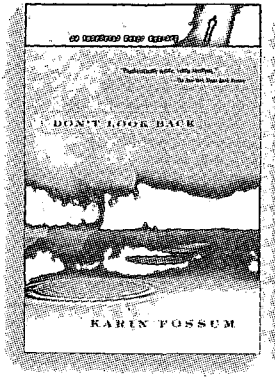

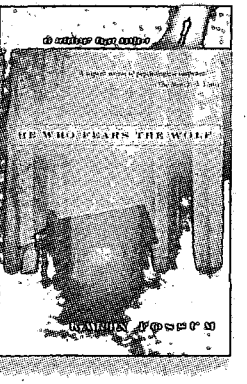

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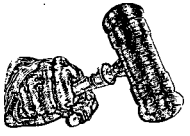

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THE BLACK CHAPEL

by Doug Allyn

"Ever rehab a church before?" Shea asked. They were driving through Saginaw in his battered Ram pickup truck. Windows down in the mid-August heat, air conditioner on the fritz. The breeze metallic with the smell of molten steel and paint baking in the auto plants.

"Not a church, exactly," Puck said. "Rewired a barn for a big revival one time. Pentecostals, as I recall, outside of Menominee. Threw up a sixteen-by-eight-foot stage in front of a dairy barn. Ran in extra power lines for the P.A. and spotlights, trucked in a dozen Porta-Johns. Quite a show."

"A barn?" Shea snorted. "Considering the size of this contract, better keep the barn story to yourself."

"Don't knock barns, you young pup," Puck shot back. "Fella that started up most of these churches was born in a manger. Which is a kind of barn, in case you're wonderin'."

"From the looks of things, this town could use a few barns. Or maybe a miracle. All I see are bars and empty storefronts. What happened to it?"

"Auto plants moved to Mexico, took the good jobs with 'em. White folks moved to the suburbs, businesses chased after 'em," Puck

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said. "Buck up, sonny, compared to where we're headed, this is prime real estate."

The old man wasn't kidding. As they crossed the Rust Street four-lane, the neighborhoods slid rapidly from poverty-stricken into outright slums. Abandoned cars, spavined sofas on tumbledown porches. Crews of hard brown teenagers idling on the corners in baggy jeans, NBA tees, and gang tats, watching them pass with wary eyes. Feral as leopards.

Doug Allyn's most recent novel, *The Burning of Rachel Hayes*, features Dr. David Westbrook, who debuted in *EQMM* and was the protagonist of three Readers Award-winning stories. We haven't seen Westbrook for some time, but we've had some splendid entries (like this one) in Mr. Allyn's Dan Shea series. . . .

Turning onto Johnstone Avenue, Shea slowed down. A sign said Dead End. It was dead-on.

An abandoned church towered over the entire block. Its massive belfry looming three-and-a-half stories above the sidewalk, eyeless windows staring out over the desolate houses in the surrounding 'hood.

A black church. Or it had been once. From the stones of its foundation to the tip of its twisted spire, the building had been painted a flat, lifeless ebony, a color so dead it seemed to drain the very light from the air.

Its paint was peeling now, strips of it hanging from the bricks like rotting skin, giving the edifice a leprous look.

At street level, the rows of stained-glass windows had been shattered, gaping like mouths with broken teeth. Its brick walls were a psychedelic riot of spray-painted obscenities and gang graffiti.

"Whew," Puck whistled. "Looks like a ten-year rehab project, at least."

"Or a job we don't want at all," Shea said darkly.

As they approached, the church seemed to shape-shift. The imposing three-story front was only a facade facing the street side. The main body of the building was only two stories tall, extendending the width of the block. On its left, a parking lot was guarded by crude stack-stone walls stretched between the church and a square brick school building, also painted flat black, top to bottom.

The school was in better shape than the church. It had new windows, shielded now by heavy steel mesh. The graffiti had been painted over, too, though it was already being replaced by a fresh crop.

Across the parking lot, a handful of teenage toughs were playing basketball on the blacktop, jostling and cursing each other. A lone

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lookout glanced up at the rumble of Shea's truck, checked him out, then turned back to the game.

Only a few cars in the lot. A gleaming white Benz limo sitting by itself and a half-dozen rattletraps. Shea parked his Dodge beside the beaters. It blended right in.

He and Puck climbed out, North Country working men in faded jeans, baseball caps, steel-toed boots. Shea wore a sport coat over his flannel shirt, Puck a Carhartt vest. Faces weathered from the wind, they looked like a matched set, a before-and-after picture, forty years apart.

An oversized gentleman eased his bulk out of the Benz limo. Latin, six and a half feet tall, three hundred-plus pounds in an impeccably tailored cream-colored suit.

"I know that guy from someplace," Puck said.

"Late-night TV," Shea said. "He's a preacher. Be nice."

"I'm always nice," Puck protested, following Shea to the limo.

"Mr. Shea? I'm Reverend Vincent Arroyo. Thanks for coming." They shook hands, checking each other out. A contrast in styles. At fifty, Arroyo looked sleek, slick, and ready for prime time, his razor-cut pompadour in perfect order, glasses lightly tinted, manicured nails buffed to a subtle gloss.

Shea was fifteen years younger with a lot more miles on him, two-day stubble, sandy hair cropped boot-camp short, knuckles scarred from construction mishaps and labor disputes.

Before Shea could introduce Puck, a red BMW convertible roared into the lot, squeaking to a halt beside the Benz. A woman about ten years older than Shea stepped out, mid-fortyish, blond, with square shoulders and a square face, dressed sensibly in a Martha Stewart smock, slacks, laced boots.

"Sorry I'm late, Pastor."

"No problem, we're just getting started. Daniel Shea, this is Lydia Ford, the consulting engineer for the project. The structural decisions are yours. Mrs. Ford will offer input on style and design."

"Ma'am." Shea nodded. "This is my foreman, Dolph Paquette, Puck to his friends, and everybody else."

"Ford?" Puck asked. "One of the car-plant Fords, are ya?"

"Actually, I was for a time. By marriage. Not anymore."

"Sorry, ma'am, I was just—I mean—"

"It's all right, Mr. Paquette, I get it all the time. So, gentlemen, shall we take a look at this unholy mess of a project?"

She headed for the church without waiting for an answer. A woman used to being obeyed. Ducking through the shattered side door, she led them up a short flight of stairs to the central entrance. Straight into hell.

"Sweet mother of God," Puck said softly.

Arroyo frowned at him, but let it pass. Couldn't blame the old man. The great nave looked like Nagasaki after the bomb. Pews

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scattered and smashed, some stacked to form crude shelters, drapes hanging in shreds from the walls. The carpeting may have been red once, hard to tell. Mottled with filth now, scorched by campfires, littered with empty wine bottles, hypodermics, and human waste.

"Welcome to St. Denis's Cathedral, guys," she said. "Originally funded and built by the Saginaw Catholic Diocese in eighteen ninety-six, closed in nineteen thirty. After serving as Temple Beth-El for a Jewish congregation for a few years, it was taken over by the Midwestern Synod in nineteen thirty-nine and renamed John Wesley Methodist, closing again in 'fifty-one. Its most recent tenants took over in 'fifty three, a sect called the Brethren of the End Days. Among other things, they painted both buildings flat black, and for the past forty years or so, it's simply been called the Black Chapel."

"What happened to it?" Shea asked.

"If you're referring specifically to the building's current condition, its problems began in—nineteen seventy-one?" Lydia arched an eyebrow at Arroyo, who nodded. "After the untimely death of its pastor, the Black Chapel was abandoned by its congregation. A Detroit bank seized the property for nonpayment of construction loans. They were unable to sell it, and over time, vandals and street people moved in, and the results are . . . as you see."

"A godawful mess," Shea said, stepping warily through the litter, examining the walls. "You said this would be a restoration project, Reverend Arroyo. That was one whopper of an understatement."

"With faith, all things are possible," Arroyo said calmly. "Originally, I was going to bring the building up to code and install state-of-the-art electronics to expand my television ministry. Mrs. Ford convinced me that the greater good for the community would be served if we could restore the building to its original condition. She even helped find grant money to pay for it. Truly a blessing."

"Dynamite might be more of a blessing," Puck grunted.

"I'll grant you it looks grim," Lydia said, "but even amidst all this dreck there's one thing you don't see. Do you know what that is, Mr. Shea?"

"Water damage," Shea said, scanning the ceiling. "There are drip marks below the broken windows where rain blows in, but there aren't any water stains or bulges in the plaster above, no blotches on the ceiling tiles. That indicates the roof is still intact, and since the walls look true, I'd guess the basic structure is probably sound."

"Very observant." She nodded. "In fact, the roof is made of leaded stone tiles and tight as a steel drum. I checked it myself."

"*You* checked it?"

"What, you think I'm too old to climb a ladder?"

"No, ma'am, it's just—never mind. Is the rest of the building like this?"

"Worse. But the only structural problem is below the baptistery.

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It looks like someone broke the water pipes and simply let them run for a time, undermining part of a bearing wall. Easy to repair. Aside from that, the damage is all cosmetic, trash and smash. But this building's only half of our project, the other half's across the parking lot. Anything else you'd like to check out before we go?"

"Not me," Shea said, "I've seen enough."

"I got a question," Puck said. "I've been a few places, Laos, Vietnam, and the Alpena County fair, but I've never seen a church painted black before."

"The parishioners repainted it to honor their minister," Arroyo said. "His name was Lucullus Black. He was pastor here from the mid fifties until his death."

"You mentioned his death was untimely? What happened to him?"

"He was murdered," Arroyo said calmly. "Shot to death right over there, on that altar. By the Chapel caretaker, in fact, who took his own life after killing his pastor. Quite a scandal at the time. His suicide note claimed Pastor Black was having an affair with his wife. The poor woman discovered the bodies, a just punishment, perhaps. God rest their souls."

"Amen to that," Puck said. "On that cheerful note, can we adjourn to the other building?"

Stepping out of the Black Chapel was like surfacing after a deep dive into murky waters. But the relief was temporary. The summer heat was already settling over the city like the lid on a broiler, raising the temperature. And pressure.

Across the parking lot, the ballplayers had stripped off their shirts, baring their muscles and tattoos, hard brown bodies scuffling in the sun glare. Hard brown eyes keeping watch on the white folks, temporarily stopping play as a police car rumbled up behind Arroyo's limousine.

Two cops climbed out, sliding nightsticks into their gun belts. One white, one black. Big and bigger.

"Good afternoon, folks. Do you have business here?" the white cop asked.

"We're looking over a remodeling project," Arroyo said. "Why?"

"Your ride's a little rich for this neighborhood, is all. In the Chapel district an expensive car usually means a new pusher in town. Or a pimp. Is this project the one the Downtown Development Authority freed up funds for? The same week the Council laid off eight police officers?"

"I think you know the answer to that, Sergeant Boyko."

"Can't imagine why they laid you boys off," Puck said. "Looks like you been doin' a crackerjack job of protectin' this here church."

"It's just another empty building in a town full of 'em, mister. You'd know that if you lived here. Where are you fellas from, anyway?"

"Up north. Valhalla."

"Things must be thin if you're this far south looking for work.

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No local contractor would even touch this job."

"Why not?" Shea asked.

"See all that graffiti on the walls?" the black cop said. "It ain't just for pretty. They're gang tags, pal. You're trespassing on turf claimed by at least three crews. The Latin Kings, Bloods, and Johnstone Gangstas. Bloods are the worst. They're national, connections in Chicago and L.A. They've been crowding the other two out. Lot of hijackings, drive-bys."

"We're aware it's a troubled neighborhood," Arroyo said. "It's one reason we chose the site. We hope to have a positive impact."

"A few more cops on the street would have a lot more impact, Reverend," Boyko said. "And maybe the city could afford more cops if they quit funding boondoggles like this."

"Sounds like a political problem," Shea said. "I'm not much on politics, myself. Prefer to tend to my own business. Which I'd like to get back to if it's all the same to you. Officer."

"No problem," Boyko said. "Checking things out is part of our job. But since you're from out of town, pal, here's some friendly advice. The Chapel district's a tough neighborhood and thanks to the city council we're spread pretty thin. Category-one crimes like armed robbery, drive-bys, and domestic violence get priority so if somebody steals a shovel from your site, our response might not be real prompt. You fellas might want to take precautions. Like nailing things down or locking 'em up real tight. Or better yet, turn your truck around and hightail it for home."

"These days my home pretty much *is* the back of a truck," Puck said. "Don't worry about us. Up north we're used to the law being a long ways off. We can deal with our own trouble."

"Pops, if y'all are dumb enough to take on this job, you're liable to find out what real trouble is."

"I know all about trouble, sonny," Puck said evenly, stepping up to the cop. "It's what happens when you call people you don't know names they don't like. Like 'Pops,' for instance."

"Whoa up," Shea said, easing between Puck and the sergeant. "No need for any problems. Thanks for the heads-up, guys. Have a nice day, okay?"

"Yeah, go scribble some tickets," Puck added. "No donut shops around here anyway."

Shaking their heads, the two policemen climbed back into their prowl car and drove off.

"My, that went well," Lydia said briskly. "Establishing friendly relations with the local authorities is always a wise move."

"Couldn't agree more," Shea said. "Let's see the other building."

"The school was built by the Diocese in eighteen ninety-eight, two years after the Chapel," Lydia explained as they strolled down the tiled hallway, footsteps echoing in the emptiness. "Our plans call

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for restructuring the classrooms into sixty one- and two-bedroom apartments. Doable, Mr. Shea?"

"I don't see any obvious problems," Shea observed, looking around. "The surfaces look true and there are plenty of bearing walls to take the weight. This building is in much better shape than the church."

"A lot cleaner, too." Puck noted.

"The city's been operating it as a jobs center the past four years," Arroyo said. "Trying to retrain some of the locals, get them off welfare. A lost cause."

"How so?" Shea asked.

"People in the Chapel district don't want to work," Arroyo sniffed. "They're addictive personalities, hooked on drugs and welfare checks."

"Ever try to live on welfare, Reverend?" Puck asked.

"Certainly not!"

A door opened down the hall and a woman stepped out, a Latina, dark eyes, her hair braided with colorful beads, wearing blue jeans and a peasant blouse. Slender and strikingly attractive.

"Can I help you?"

"It's Pastor Arroyo, Carmen. I'm giving some of my people a tour. Carmen San Miguel, this is Mr. Dan Shea. He'll be handling the heavy construction. I believe you've already met Mrs. Ford."

"Our lease agreement allows us to operate until the end of the month," Carmen said flatly. "I expect you to honor it."

"Why fight progress, my dear?" Arroyo chided. "I should think you'd be overjoyed to move to the west side. It's not the end of the world."

"It might as well be. There's no bus service out here and most of my trainees don't have cars. How will they get to the new jobs center? Speculators are already buying up rental units in the district and evicting the tenants. Where do you expect them to go, Reverend?"

"I'm sure there's affordable housing in other parts of town."

"Hit-or-miss, maybe, but they'll be isolated, no relatives or sense of community. Most of them grew up in this neighborhood. They've never lived anywhere else."

"Perhaps a few people will have difficulty adjusting, but what about those kids playing out there? How often do they duck behind those walls to dodge drive-by bullets? Do you really think they're better off in this neighborhood? Suburban kids their age are deciding between Michigan State or U of M. Kids in the Chapel district get jumped into gangs while they're still in junior high. Breaking up this community will be a public service."

"This place is a jobs center, right?" Shea interrupted. "Got any people who want to work?"

"Of course, that's why they're here. We help them earn GEDs,

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prep them for job interviews—"

"I don't care about resumes, miss, but I'll need workers to help clean up the Chapel. Manual labor, seven to five, six days a week till the job's done. Minimum wage plus three bucks an hour. Five people for openers. Can you supply 'em?"

"That depends," Carmen said. "Will it be a problem if some are ex-convicts?"

"Only if they got sent up for bein' lazy. House rules: no dope or booze on the job. If they show up late or stoned, they're gone. Period. No excuses, no second chances. Deal?"

"I can supply the people, as long as you don't try to order them around like cattle. They're poor, but they have pride. A few may have, well . . . difficulty with authority."

"So does every man in my crew."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you, Mr. Shea. When do you want them to start?"

"Tomorrow. Seven o'clock. Tell 'em to wear old clothes."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Carmen said, smiling for the first time. "My trainees have problems, but overdressing isn't one of them."

"Well done, Mr. Shea." Arroyo beamed as they made their way out of the school. "I've been battling with Carmen San Miguel for the past eighteen months. She's attended every council meeting to speak against this project. Two minutes and you get her cooperation. Maybe I should switch to your brand of aftershave."

"She's got workers, we've got jobs. Why can't we all get along?"

"Her being a pretty little thing doesn't hurt, neither," Puck said slyly.

"Didn't notice," Shea said. "Is there someplace we can grab a cup of coffee and kick this around?

"Right across the street," Arroyo said. "Paddy Ryan's. The only cafe in the neighborhood."

A pleasant surprise. Paddy Ryan's was like stepping back in time forty years. An old-fashioned diner, tiled walls inside and out, large windows with a view of the Black Chapel parking lot and the surrounding streets. Turquoise Formica counter- and tabletops, chrome-sided stools. The only thing missing was bobbysoxers in poodle skirts.

An odd mix of photographs staring down from the walls. Black luminaries like Langston Hughes mingled with IRA heroes—Charles Parnell, Michael Collins. All of them as dead as the district.

The only customers were three young black guys sitting at a table in the corner, backs to the wall. Gangbangers: jeans, muscle tees, tattoos. Eyeing the new arrivals like lions staked out over a waterhole.

Arroyo chose a booth beside a window facing the Chapel and the

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others joined him.

Two old guys behind the counter, built like beer barrels, both bald with gray fringes, same blunt features. The older one was wearing Coke-bottle glasses, sitting on a stool, an aluminum cane at hand. His brother bustled over to Arroyo's booth, cheery as a leprechaun.

"Welcome to Ryan's, folks. I'm Sam, that's my brother Morrie over there at the counter. Before you ask, nope, we're not related to Robert Ryan or Meg Ryan or even Ryan O'Neal, but we're the only Ryans in this 'hood. Coffee all around for openers?"

As Sam hurried off to fill their order, the tallest of the gangbangers rose languidly and sauntered over. A black pirate do-rag and wraparound shades gave him a praying-mantis look.

"Y'all lookin' for some action? Smoke, coke, light you up, mellow you out?"

"All we want is a quiet place to talk, if that's all right," Shea said.

"Then maybe you best keep lookin'—"

"You know these folks, Razor?" Sam Ryan interrupted, brushing past him with a tray, dealing out steaming mugs of coffee.

"I'm meetin' 'em right now, Sam. Tryin' to drum up a little trade, them bein' new blood and all."

"Okay, you've met 'em. How about you see to your friends?"

"My dawgs are okay where they are. These people don't belong here, Sam."

"Yeah? When I was a boy growin' up on Williamson, folks said your people didn't belong neither. But here you are, and you're welcome, Razor. As long as you mind your business."

"Don't be pushin' me, Sam."

"Push you? What are you talkin' about? I'm just a fat old man. 'Course, if you put me in the hospital, you and your dawgs'll need a new place to hang. And there ain't noplace else. Is there?"

Razor stared at the old man for what seemed like a month. Sam met his gaze calmly, and in the end, Razor looked away first.

"Maybe you right. The Paddy's ain't much, but it's all there is." He turned and sauntered back to his crew, graceful as a stalking cat.

"Friend of yours?" Puck asked, watching the youth snake between the tables.

"Just a local businessman." Sam sighed. "The way the neighborhood is nowadays, me and Morrie can't be picky about our clientele."

"Maybe Reverend Arroyo's new development will help your business," Lydia offered.

"We could use some help. Maybe you folks can, too. We've got a fair-sized parking lot, which isn't exactly overcrowded these days. Why don't you folks park your cars at our place, let the local kids play ball in the Chapel lot? It's the only basketball court in the neighborhood."

"That's a generous offer," Shea said, "but they'll have to find someplace else. The lot will be a construction zone. It won't be safe."

"Safe?" Sam snorted. "Believe you me, they're a lot safer shoot-

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ing hoops than shooting each other. Or you. And your job site's safer if they're playing where we can watch 'em instead of hangin' on the corners thinkin' up mischief. At least at the Chapel they can duck behind the walls if some gang decides to shoot up the neighborhood. Keeping the basketball court open will buy you some goodwill, mister. And in this part of town, you can use all the good you can get. Think it over. Either way, our offer stands."

"From what you said, I take it you've lived here a long time, Mr. Ryan?" Lydia said.

"Boy and man, yes, ma'am."

"Then you remember the Black Chapel before it fell into disrepair?"

"Back when Black Luke ran it? You bet. A wild place in those days."

"Black Luke?"

"The Right Reverend Lucullus Black, minister to the Brethren of the End Days," Sam said, showing a gap-toothed smile. "Black Luke to us locals. We called his people Dazers because Luke preached the End Days, you know? And most of his flock acted like they were in a daze. Luke took over the Chapel in the 'fifties, built up a big following. Heck of a preacher. We're Catholic, sort of, but Morrie and I caught a few of Luke's services ourselves. Great show. He was a local star, like James Brown or Prince, Saginaw style. I don't suppose you young folks remember much about the 'sixties?"

Lydia smiled. "My mom used to say if you can remember the 'sixties, you weren't really there."

Sam nodded. "She's dead right about that. 'Sixties were boom times in this town. Auto plants runnin' triple shifts, seven days a week. People had jobs, plenty of money, and Black Luke knew how to get his share. These are the End Days, people, so let's party hearty while we can."

"Sounds like my kind of church," Puck said.

"Back then, a lot of people felt the same way. He really packed 'em in."

"Would you happen to have any pictures of the Chapel from those days?" Lydia asked.

"Pictures, ma'am?"

"We want the building as close to original as possible. I found a few photographs in the Castle Museum archives, but they only show the building's facade."

"You're restoring it? I thought you folks were converting it into condos or something."

"The school will be remodeled into apartments but the Black Chapel is an historic building," Arroyo said. "We're going to restore it to what it was."

"Mister," Ryan said softly, shaking his head, "you got no idea what that place was."

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"I don't understand."

"Then I'll tell ya. Workin' this neighborhood, you meet some lowlifes, but Black Luke was the rock-bottom worst. That man didn't believe in a damn thing but the almighty dollar. Called the congregation his flock and sheared 'em like the sheep they were. Bangin' half the women in his church and their daughters, too. Young girls, twelve, thirteen. And they worshiped him! Treated him like some kind of junior-league Jesus. When they painted that Chapel black in his honor, I thought the End Days might really be here, that God almighty would strike him dead with lightning or something. That was thirty-odd years ago and I still get a shiver every time I look at it."

"I'll admit, the place gives a man pause," Puck acknowledged. "Never seen a church quite like it. But if this Reverend Black was so bad, why didn't somebody stop him?"

"Somebody did. Cal Jenkins, the church caretaker, shot Luke in the head. And most of us locals said amen, brother. If Cal hadn't shot himself, too, he would have been a shoo-in for mayor around here. Don't restore Luke's church to what it was, folks. Make it something better."

"Well, we'll certainly try," Arroyo said tactfully.

"Didn't mean to go off on you like that." Sam smiled. "Old-timers like to hear ourselves talk. There is one more thing you oughta know, though. The Black Chapel's haunted, they say."

"Really?"

"Why wouldn't it be, all the vile crap that went down there and still does? Locals claim Black Luke and ole Cal wander the building at night, bleeding from their bullet holes, looking for their lost souls."

"More likely it's junkies stumbling around," Shea said. "From the trash, it looks like an army of them have been crashing in there."

Sam nodded. "Might be junkies. On the other hand, if you restore the Chapel, maybe you'll bring Black Luke back with it. And I doubt roasting in hell all these years has improved his disposition any."

"The doors of my Chapel will be open to everyone," Arroyo said smoothly, "even Pastor Black, if he returns. You're welcome to attend our services yourself, Mr. Ryan."

"Then you'd better bump up your fire insurance, Pastor. If Morrie and I stop by, your church'll surely get popped by lightning."

"I doubt it." Arroyo smiled politely, rising. "And don't think you've frightened me away with your ghost stories. I have an important meeting. I'll leave you two to sort things out."

Puck excused himself as well, went off to find the men's. Leaving Lydia Ford and Shea facing each other across the turquoise Formica.

"So, Mr. Shea. Are we going to get along?"

"Maybe. As long as you understand that I don't work for you, Mrs. Ford. I work for the guy who signs my checks. On this job, that's Pastor Arroyo."

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"Fair enough, as long as *you* understand that that same gentleman has given me final say on all design decisions. I have a double masters in Interior Design and engineering. I'm not a civilian, Mr. Shea."

"Glad to hear it. And call me Dan. Mr. Shea is my dad."

"All right then, Dan. Have you worked with female engineers before?"

"Not many, and up north we call them ladies, not females."

"Very courteous. Any problems working with women?"

"Not exactly. It's just different."

"Really?" she said, arching an eyebrow. "How so?"

"In school you studied construction equipment, right? Skilsaws, Sawzalls, plate compactors? You know how they work?"

"I'm familiar with their specs and capabilities, yes."

"Could you operate one? For wages, I mean?"

"Certainly not. A soil compactor weighs more than I do. Why?"

"There. That's the difference between you and a male engineer."

"Because a man can operate heavy machinery and I can't?"

"No, ma'am. Construction gear is heavy, dirty, and hard to handle. A Sawzall will zip through a two-by-six in three seconds and through your arm a lot faster than that. There's no shame in admitting you can't operate one. Trouble is, deep down, most male engineers think they can. It's a guy thing. Makes 'em dangerous. Are you dangerous, Mrs. Ford?"

"Only when provoked, Mr. Shea. Don't worry, I won't try filling in for any of your men. You run your side of the business, I'll run mine."

"Then we should get along fine."

"Somehow, I doubt that," she sighed.

"Yeah." Dan nodded. "Me too."

Ordinarily, Shea's gypsy construction crew rolling into a town scared the hell out of folks. A motley caravan of vans and work trucks driven by wild North Country boys, woolly and rough around the edges? Fetch the family twelve-gauge down from the attic and keep it close at hand.

The Black Chapel neighborhood barely noticed. In the run-down shacks and shabby apartments, people kept blinds drawn and doors triple-locked as a matter of course. Most homes had guns. Loaded and handy.

A new crew of roughneck white boys in town? So what? Drugs, drive-bys, and crack-crazy gangbangers had already turned the Black Chapel district into a combat zone. One more posse didn't matter a damn.

Shea's troubles began at dawn the first day. Four burly black men and an even tougher-looking heavyset woman were waiting outside the church at seven when Dan arrived. They said Carmen San Miguel had sent them. Shea explained the job of cleaning up

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the church, told them the rules and the wages. Any questions?

"Damn right!" the smallest of them piped up, a ratty little guy with a cast in one eye. "Carmen said we'd be workin' real construction jobs. We oughta get more'n minimum wage and a crummy three bucks a hour."

"Put a cork in it, Freddy," the black woman said. "Carmen never said that and I need this job."

"So do I," Shea said. "You're hired, miss. Freddy, take a hike. Any other complaints?"

Nope. Shea took names and social-security numbers from the willing four and set them to work cleaning out the nave. They ripped into the job with a will but he warned Puck to keep a weather eye on them anyway. They were a crusty bunch and new hires always bring new headaches. Still, one attitude case out of five was better than average.

The next hassle came from Mrs. Ford. Most of the church pews had been trashed for firewood or the hell of it. Lydia wanted someone to sort through the wreckage, hoping to salvage a few pews from the pieces.

"No offense, but that's nuts," Shea said bluntly. "You can replace them for twenty bucks a pop in any secondhand store."

"But they wouldn't be from this church," Lydia countered. "A restoration is supposed to preserve the heritage of a particular place."

"We're also supposed to finish the job before Christmas. I can't spare men for this."

"Then loan me two of your new-hires. They won't mind the extra hours. We can use the columbarium to store the salvageable pieces. The porch off the north side."

"I know what a columbarium is, lady."

"Glad to hear it. And since we're not working in it yet, I'd like to use it. Okay?"

Shea eyed her, knowing he should draw a damn line in the sand right here and now. Decided against it. He'd be going head-to-head with Mrs. Ford soon enough. A few crummy pews weren't worth a war. Or so he told himself.

"Okay," he said abruptly, "go ahead. No overtime, though."

"Thank you, Mr. Shea."

"Yeah, right." Dodged that bullet. But if she was already giving him static, it didn't bode well for the long run.

More trouble. This time from a guy who was born for it. Mafe Rochon. Full-blood Anishnabeg/Ojibwa, and proud of his heritage. Mafe wore his thick hair braided, favored beaded buckskin shirts. A bull of a man, ironworker, hard worker, best hand on the planet with an acetylene torch.

And one surly-ass attitude case. Mean as a snake when he was drinking, worse when he wasn't. Serious bar brawler. Never met a

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fight he didn't like.

Shea and Mafe had tangled more than once and expected to again. But this time was different.

Rochon showed for work, running late, head hammering from a major hangover. Whipping his Chevrolet pickup into the church lot, he nearly rolled his truck veering to avoid one of the basketball players.

Skidding the big Chevy to a screeching halt, Mafe piled out, roaring a barrage of curses, expecting to scatter the teenyboppers like quail. But they didn't run. Held their ground instead, eyeing him warily. Uneasy, but unmoved. As though they'd heard it all before.

Probably had.

"You better slow that junker the hell down, chief," a little fireplug of a kid in a Raiders muscle tee said, stepping up to Mafe, right in his face. "You run somebody over, it's rough gettin' blood off ya bumper."

Kid said it flat, no smile, no inflection. Like lobbing a rock at a grizzly to see what would happen. The others watched, ready to run. Or fight.

A metaphysical moment for Mafe. Through the grim haze of his hangover, he glimpsed the lightning flicker of a spirit vision, the memory of a savage clearing he'd found as a boy.

Spattered with blood. Bone chips and shreds of fur strewn about, the ground torn and gouged as though it had been attacked.

"A fierce battle happened here," his grandfather said, squatting on his heels, reading the signs. "A rogue bear found coyotes feeding on a fawn. Sure of his power, the bear tried to drive them off. But the coyotes had blood in their mouths and would not go. They fought the giant bear for their kill. And he slaughtered many, gutting them with his razor claws, hurling their broken bodies about like toys. But more coyotes came, drawn to the combat by the stench of blood. Boiling over him, they pulled the great bear down. And ripped him to pieces. And in their madness, they turned on each other, savaging their own over his carcass."

The ancient Anishnabeg were a preliterate people who shared tribal wisdom through storytelling, memorable tales that always had a point.

Even hung over, Mafe remembered how that bear ended up. And he recognized the daredevil gleam in the fireplug's eyes. Knew it well. Saw it every time he looked in a mirror.

So instead of clocking the little punk, he backed away. And went off in search of Shea.

Found him arguing with Lydia Ford over the pews. Butting in with his usual tact, Mafe told Shea about his face-off with the ballplayers.

"No problem." Shea shrugged. "Round up a couple of guys, we'll run 'em off."

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"Sam Ryan said we could use his parking lot," Lydia argued. "If the boys aren't underfoot, why not let them stay?"

"No chance," Shea said. "It's a construction zone. If one of them gets run over—"

"Maybe I can talk 'em around," Mafe offered. "Tell 'em if a truck pulls in, get their skinny asses out of the way. They ain't got many places to play in this 'hood. The lady's right, let's leave 'em be. I played some ball when I was jailin' in Jackson. Maybe I can show 'em a few moves."

Shea stared at the big man as if he'd suddenly started speaking Swahili.

"Okay, but they're your responsibility, Mafe," Shea said. "They can play as long as they stay out of our way. Any problems, they're history. And so are you."

"Hell, you can't fire me, Danny." Rochon grinned. "You ain't happy unless you're knee-deep in trouble, and who gives you more grief than me? Don't worry, I'll straighten 'em out."

Mafe walked off whistling, leaving Shea shaking his head.

"Is that a fair assessment?" Lydia asked. "Do you like trouble?"

"If I do, I damn sure picked the right business," Shea said. "How about you?"

"Me? I'm just trying to save my fellow antiques."

"Your fellow what?"

"Antiques, Mr. Shea. It was joke. About my age."

"What about it?"

"I—never mind. We'd better get back to work."

"Mrs. Ford?" he called after her. "If you're gonna josh me, better hold up a sign or something. I'm just a simple country boy, you know?"

Day one and she was already ticking him off. And he wasn't even sure why.

Maybe her confidence bothered him. The kind that comes with money. Problems shrink fast when you can throw cash at 'em. An option Shea never had. He and every man in his crew risked their necks for wages every damned day. Rebuilding the Black Chapel would be tough enough without some rich . . . dilettante trying to salvage every splinter in the place.

But by noon, his mood lightened. He was already seeing progress, feeling the first surge of satisfaction as the project began morphing from a catastrophe into an endless string of problems, tough but doable.

His new-hires had the first dumpster nearly full; Shea had to call for an early pickup and replacement. Then building materials began arriving and he had to scramble to find space for them. Anything left outside would vanish like morning mist in this neighborhood.

He poked his head into Carmen San Miguel's classroom to ask permission to use empty rooms in the school for storage. Techni-

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cally, he didn't need her consent, but she was a pretty girl and he was a long way from home. She gave him permission, and a warm smile to go with it.

Walking back, he saw the basketball players move politely aside for the refuse truck dropping off the dumpster. Score one for crazy Mafe.

Inside the church, the new-hires were making a visible dent. And rich or not, the former Mrs. Ford wasn't afraid to get dirty. Working alongside the temps in the filth of the nave, Lydia was checking over the wrecked pews, marking some for salvage, the rest for the dumpster parked out front. And clearly she knew the difference. Score one for her.

Midafternoon, another pleasant surprise. Carmen San Miguel found Shea on the front steps, looking up at the bell tower.

"Mr. Shea? I just stopped by to see how the people I sent are working out." She looked good, a trim figure in a white silk blouse, slacks, and sandals. No braids today, her hair brushed into a midnight tangle.

"So far, better than expected. I didn't take them all, though."

"You dumped Fast Freddy, right?" She smiled. "He's got an attitude but he was all I could get on short notice. I can find a replacement if you like."

"Find us two or three if you can," Lydia Ford said, joining them, brushing the dust off her chambray work shirt.

"Actually, hiring hands is my responsibility," Shea pointed out.

"You're right, sorry," Lydia said. "But since I'll need help to reassemble those pews—"

"I told you I can't spare men for that."

"Which is exactly why you should hire two more temps for a few days," she said sweetly. "Teenagers will be fine, I can show them what to do."

"Terrific. I've got Mafe coaching basketball, you teaching Carpentry 101. What's next? Wanna hire Boy Scouts to do the welding?"

"I seem to have caught you two at a bad time," Carmen said, backing away uneasily. "Tell you what, if you decide you need more people—"

"We just did," Shea said. "Send us two more. Young guys who don't mind learning on the job."

"You've got it," Carmen said, flashing him a brilliant smile. "I can have them here in a few hours." Dodging two workmen carrying a two-by-ten, she trotted back to her classroom.

"Thanks, Carmen," Lydia called after her. "And thank you, too, Mr. Shea."

"You're not welcome, Mrs. Ford. What the hell happened to our you-run-your-show-I'll-run-mine deal? I do the hiring here."

"I know that. I've already apologized and one 'sorry' per screwup is all you get. Maybe I can make it up to you. Do you think Car-

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men's an attractive girl?"

"I guess. So?"

"So she had her hair done and that's a new outfit. A lot of trouble just to check on some new hires, don't you think?"

"What's your point?"

"Never mind." Lydia sighed. "Men." She walked off, shaking her head. Her blond mop was matted from her hard hat and her work smock was filthy. But there was an elegance in the way she moved. Grace. Carmen might be half her age, but there was more than one good-looking woman on this job.

By the third day, the start-up craziness was beginning to subside. The new hires had completely cleared the trash from the great nave, leaving an empty cavern that echoed every footstep. They'd worked out so well that Shea kept them on, continuing the cleanup in the transepts and exhibit hall.

He'd taken over the church vestry as a temporary office, with a drawing table for blueprints, desks for himself and Mrs. Ford, and a rollaway bed against the back wall. With a cased shotgun beneath it. For the duration, either Shea or Puck would be spending the night in the Chapel. Guard duty.

Shea was headed out the Chapel door to join his crew for lunch at Ryan's when Lydia Ford called him back.

"Could you show me how to operate the scissors lift, Mr. Shea? I want to see what's above the false ceiling in the nave."

"Why? The ceiling's level and the panels appear to be in good shape."

"I know, but I'm curious about something. Here, let me show you." He followed her into the vestry/office. Flipping open the Toshiba laptop computer on her desk, she brought up a file of photographs and began scrolling through them.

"I scanned these into my computer at the Saginaw Historical Society. . . . Here, look at this one."

The photo showed the nave as it must have been forty years before, its pews full of worshipers, a blurred figure in vestments preaching from the altar.

"Is that Reverend Black? But . . . he's a white guy."

"Of course. Oh, you assumed he was black because of the neighborhood? In those days it was still in transition, from blue-collar Irish to African-American. If you look at the congregation, it's about half and half, which probably reflected the mix in those days. The Ryan brothers may be the last Irish holdouts."

"Too bad for them. Picture's appropriate, though."

"How do you mean?"

"Look at the windows. They're broken now, but look at the shapes. With those rounded tops, it looks like Pastor Black was preaching to a row of tombstones. Maybe he should have taken the hint."

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"You're right, they do look like gravestones. What an odd illusion. But I'm more interested in the ceiling. As you can see, this shot shows a dropped ceiling with acoustical tiles, whereas, in this one—" she flashed past a few more photos—"taken in nineteen thirty-six, no acoustical tiles."

"How do you know that? The shot doesn't show the ceiling."

"Simple. They didn't have acoustical tile in 'thirty-six. But if you look at the back of the nave, you can see that the upper corners appear to be rounded. I think the Chapel had an embossed metal ceiling, originally, and it may still be up there, above those tiles."

"What if it is? What difference does it make?"

"Maybe none. It might not be there at all, but embossed ceilings from that era are fairly rare, especially in a church. I definitely want to take a look. So? Are you going to help me or not?"

"That ceiling's nearly thirty-five feet up, which is near the maximum extension for the Skyjack. Do you have any trouble with heights?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay, let's find out." Trotting over to the scissors lift, Shea climbed onto its railed platform and switched on the battery power. The Skyjack is exactly that, an electric scissors jack on wheels that resembles an oversized auto jack with a railed platform on top. But instead of lifting a car thirty inches, some Skyjacks can go fifty feet straight up. Or more. Using the control panel to guide it, Shea drove the unit out to the center of the floor. "All aboard."

He gave Lydia a hand onto the platform, locked the safety rail shut, started the lift up, then immediately stopped it.

"Wait a minute. How much do you weigh, Mrs. Ford?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The platform has a load limit, and since we're both going up . . . ?"

"What's the limit?"

"Four fifty."

"And how much do you weigh, Mr. Shea?"

"One-eighty."

"Then we'll be well under— You knew that already, didn't you?"

"Gotcha." He grinned, pressing the Up button again. "Don't move while the platform's in motion, please, these things are shaky enough as it is."

He kept a wary eye on Lydia as the Skyjack platform rose slowly toward the ceiling. Most people have at least some fear of heights, and rumbling upward with only a rail between you and a thirty-foot drop can reduce grown men to quivering gobs of Jell-O.

Lydia kept a white-knuckled grip on the rail, but seemed more curious than fearful. Until the platform approached twenty-five feet—

"Could we stop, please?"

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"Sure. Wanna head back down?"

"No, I just . . . My goodness. Look at this view." Below them, the nave spread out like an ancient ruin, destruction in all directions.

"What a pity," she said softly. "It must have been magnificent once. If we could fly, and see the damage we do from above, maybe we'd do less of it. . . . Sorry. Didn't mean to preach."

"You're in the right spot for it. And it's probably the nicest sermon this dump ever had."

"You don't like this building, do you?"

Shea hesitated, then shrugged. "No. I don't."

"I know most builders prefer new construction—"

"It's not that. Ordinarily, I prefer old buildings to new ones. They have character. Personalities. Sometimes on a night shift you can almost hear them whispering stories about the people they've sheltered, the lives they've touched."

"That's very poetic."

"For a north-woods roughneck, you mean."

"I didn't say that."

"Didn't have to. Going up." Tapping the control, Shea took them up the last five feet, halting just below the ceiling.

No hesitation on Lydia's part. Sliding her fingers between the acoustic tile and its metal support frame, she carefully lifted the panel upward, easing it aside.

Frowning, she looked at her fingertips.

"What is it?" Shea asked.

She shook her head. Taking a penlight out of her smock pocket, she stood on her tiptoes, her head and shoulders disappearing into the dark opening. Light flickering as she played it about. Taking a small digital camera out of her pocket, she prepared to shoot, then hesitated.

"Mr. Shea," she said quietly, "are the Chapel doors open?"

"What?"

"The Chapel doors," she hissed, her voice barely above a whisper, "are they open?"

"Um . . . yes, they are. Why?"

But Lydia had already stepped up again, her head and shoulders invisible above the ceiling. Lightning flickered as she snapped photographs—and then she suddenly ducked out of the hole, dropping to her hands and knees on the platform.

"Take us down!" Dark forms flashed out of the opening, circling wildly around the platform in a widening circle of madness.

Bats! Dozens of them, pouring out of the ceiling in a torrent! Lydia recoiled as one bounced off her shoulder, slipped, and nearly slid under the railing. Shea's heart froze. They were thirty feet up and there wasn't a damn thing he could do but duck and jam the down button!

Regaining her balance, Lydia stayed crouched as the Skyjack

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continued its slow descent.

More bats were pouring through the gap, joining the cloud wheeling overhead. A few discovered the open doors and rocketed out to freedom. More followed, dive-bombing Shea and Lydia as they frantically fled toward the exit.

"Come on, damn it!" he shouted, cursing the control panel. Twenty feet, fifteen, ten—a bat smacked Lydia in the back of the head, tangled in her hair, wings beating frantically, fighting to escape.

Thrashing about, desperately trying to brush it away, Lydia stumbled against the rail, losing her balance. Lunging across the platform, Shea grabbed her by the waist, pulling her back and tossing the bat aside before the force of his rush carried them down.

Shea hit the platform deck flat on his back, banging his head on the corrugated steel, yet somehow held on to her waist, breaking her fall. For a split second his world winked out, then slowly faded back in. As the haze cleared, he realized he was holding Lydia Ford a foot above him, his hands clamped firmly on her rib cage.

Her face was soot-smudged, her blond mop tousled, eyes glistening with excitement. And he made no move to let her go.

"Are you okay?" they said together, then smiled. Together.

"I think you just saved my life," Lydia said at last.

"No charge." And still he didn't let her go.

"What's all the racket—whoa!" Puck said, ducking as a pair of bats flashed past him through the doorway. "Where the hell did they come from?"

"Above the false ceiling," Lydia said, getting up, brushing herself off. "They've been there for years. A lot of guano's scattered around."

"What were you two doin'—figurin' to do about them bats?" Puck amended as Shea shot him a look.

"They shouldn't be a problem," Lydia said, taking a breath. "Smoke canisters above the tiles will drive them out if we leave the doors open. Once the ceiling comes down, they won't be back."

"Whoa up, what are you talking about?" Shea said. "There's nothing wrong with that ceiling. It's the only thing in the place that's intact."

"But it's not original. It's barely fifty years old."

"Wow, only fifty? Excuse me if that seems like a lot. I wasn't born yet. Tearing those tiles down will add a week to the schedule plus the expense of repairing whatever's above it, plus we'll all be wearing respirators for a month because bat crap's poisonous. There's no room for any of that in the budget."

"The budget's my problem, Mr. Shea. The only added cost will be the labor to take down the tiles. The original ceiling is still in place. Embossed metal plates, circa eighteen ninety, in practically mint condition."

"Great. If they've lasted a damn century then let's leave 'em for the next remodeling project. I've got a full boat already."

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"It's not your call," Lydia said firmly. "It's mine and I just made it. The tiled ceiling goes."

Dan opened his mouth to argue, then wheeled and stalked off.

"Wait a minute," she called after him. "Can't we talk about this? At least look at the pictures I took of the old ceiling."

"What's the point? You're right, it's your call. Except I think you forgot I don't work for you, Mrs. Ford. We'll see what Arroyo has to say about this."

"Fine by me."

"One more thing: If you ride the Skyjack again, be really careful. Next time, I'll let you fall."

They avoided each other the rest of the day, which wasn't difficult in the chaos of construction. At five, Arroyo stopped by for his daily update and they adjourned to the office, where Lydia popped her laptop open and quickly brought up the new photographs she'd taken.

"As you can see, the original ceiling is still intact. It's also nearly four feet higher than the acoustic tiles, giving the room a massively larger look. On television, it will be spectacular. Timeless."

"It's certainly striking," Arroyo said drily. "Your opinion, Mr. Shea?"

Dan hesitated. "No opinion," he said curtly. "Not my call."

"I see. Well, to be honest, I'm not sure. Perhaps we can discuss it over dinner, Mrs. Ford? I find a little social time with my employees makes the job go smoother. All work and no play, as they say."

"Dinner would be lovely," Lydia said. "Of course, Mr. Shea and I will have to change, we're hardly ready for prime time. Why don't you have your wife join us? Make a real party of it."

Arroyo eyed her coolly a moment, then shrugged. "Unfortunately, I seem to be running a bit late. Another time, perhaps. As for the ceiling, you're right, it will look very dramatic on camera. Tear down the tiles, Mr. Shea." And he was gone.

Lydia was staring at Shea.

"What?"

"Know something, Shea? Discussing things over supper isn't a half-bad idea. Except for the part about dressing up. Paddy Ryan's? My treat?"

They took the booth with a view of the Chapel. Sam brought them coffee, jotted down their orders, and left them to it.

"Does that happen a lot?" Shea asked. "Clients hitting on you, I mean?"

"Why? Do you find the idea so incredible?"

"Of course not. And you handled it well, it's just that . . . Look, can we straighten something out? Seems like every time we have a conversation, we end up arguing. I don't know what's wrong, personality clash, miscommunication, whatever. But I don't like it."

"Nor do I. Maybe it's the generation gap."

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"Nuts to that. It's only nine years, maybe less."

"What is?"

"Your famous generation gap, Mrs. Ford. I looked you up on the Internet. Assuming you were eighteen when you graduated from high school, you're nine years older than I am."

"You've got a lot of nerve!"

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment!"

"It is where I come from, lady. Working construction takes nerve. And if checking out your age was rude, sorry about that. At least I'm working on the problem."

"What problem?"

"The reason you and I can't swap three sentences without ticking each other off. Like just now, for instance. Can we get back to that?"

She looked away a moment, fuming.

"All right, Mr. Shea," she said, her eyes locking on to his like gun sights. "I agree we have some issues. But I think they're mostly on your side. So. Exactly what is your problem? With me, I mean."

"Straight up? You bug me. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's your money. From what I found on the 'Net about family connections, charity donations, and such, you must be pretty well off."

"By your standards, that's probably true. So?"

"So this is a low-rent project. Nobody cares about it but Arroyo and he's only looking to get a big, historic church for peanuts. It's a dirty, dangerous gig. And since you obviously don't have to work for a living, why are you here?"

"What, you think I'm just playing at this?"

"Heck no, you're really good at what you do. Good enough that you could probably use your connections to land a lot better job than this one."

"You're right, I probably could. My turn, Mr. Shea. If you hit the lotto tomorrow, what would you do with the money?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Mine. Answer it, please."

"You're serious? All right, how much do I win?"

"Let's say two million."

"Two? Okay, I've got a sister in Texas, raising three kids on her own. I'd like to help her more than I do. Buy her a house, maybe. And I'd definitely give my guys a raise. My aunt runs a school for handicapped kids—you're shaking your head. What?"

"So far, you've only mentioned people you'd help. What about you? Wouldn't you like a new house?"

"Don't need one. I live with my dad when I'm home, which isn't often. My grandfather built our house, felled the logs himself, peeled and set them. I'd like to add on to it someday, but I'll do it myself, by hand. See if I can match his work."

"So money really doesn't matter to you?"

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"Of course money matters. A lot."

"But the work matters more. Even if you hit the lotto, you'd keep working, wouldn't you?"

"Sure. I like what I do."

"Well, so do I. The only difference is that, since I don't *need* to work, I try to choose projects that can have an impact. Like this one. With luck, this reclamation won't just save an historic building, it could revitalize the whole area."

"Fair enough. I guess I can understand that."

"So when it comes to work and money, we're not so far apart, are we?"

"Doesn't seem like it. Which brings us to the thing on the Skyjack."

"Thing?"

"You know what I'm talking about. When I caught you. The way it felt when I held you."

"You mean after you hit your head? You were probably groggy. It was only for a few seconds, and even if it felt like . . . something, I'm still old enough to be, well, your older sister, anyway."

"Can we leave the age thing out of this for now?"

"No, I don't think we can. It's like money. It matters."

"Not to me. Or at least, not as much as the rest of it."

"The rest of what?"

"For openers, I don't want to make a complete ass of myself. If I've misread things and what happened was totally one-sided, just say so and I'm gone."

"Wow, that's really tempting."

"What is? Blowing me off?"

"It would certainly simplify things. But it wouldn't be . . . honest. The truth is that you seem like a nice young man—"

"Skip the young part, okay?"

"All right, a nice guy, then," she conceded. "You sort of saved my life and it's been a long time since anyone . . . held me in midair. And I liked it. It made me feel . . . never mind. Maybe we shouldn't make too much of a three-second tumble."

"It didn't start then. I think it started the first day, the first time I met you. It just took awhile to register."

"That doesn't change the way things are. My work is important to me and office romances are bad for business. I don't do flings, Mr. Shea."

"Neither do I. That's not what this is about."

"Then what is it about? What do you want from me?"

"Nothing! Or maybe a lot. I don't know! I mean—damn. I'm not saying this very well, am I?"

"You're doing fine. In fact, if this is a line, it's a pretty good one."

"It's not. But—look, I'm not good at this. And it's your turn again anyway. What do you think?"

"I'm not sure what to think. But this is what I know. The situa-

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tion's impossible. We're a terrible mismatch, I'm older than you are, we have practically nothing in common, the timing couldn't be worse—why are you smiling?"

"Because it's familiar. I came up with pretty much the same list. But it doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"Look, I'm not saying this makes any sense, I just know how I feel. How you make me feel. I want this. But if you don't, just say so and I'll back all the way off. Like it never happened. Is that what you want?"

"I don't *know,* I just—could you please shut up a minute? I need to think."

"Maybe I should go—" She glared him back into his seat. "Or I could just sit here and shut up."

The silence stretched out for roughly a decade. Or felt like it.

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath.

"Okay?"

"I think I've got it sorted out. It's just . . . chemistry. We don't know each other or have enough in common for it to be anything else. Chemistry. An infatuation. Whatever you want to call it, that's all it is."

"Chemistry. That's not such a bad thing to have, right?"

"No. There are worse things than chemistry."

"So what do we do, Lydia? Forget about it?"

No answer. She looked away, and for a moment seemed so vulnerable and unsure of herself that he wanted to take her hand, tell her everything would work out. But knew it would be the wrong thing to do. Whether this came to something or nothing was her call. He'd have to live with it either way. . . . She turned back to him, meeting his eyes. And he had no idea what she'd decided.

"We should go," Lydia said.

Shea paid the check, said goodnight to Sam and Morrie. Lydia took his hand as they stepped out of the cafe into the gathering dusk. Behind them, the lights of Paddy Ryan's flickered out as Sam closed for the night.

Their cars were parked in the cafe lot, but she led him across the street to the Chapel instead.

"Back here?" he asked. "Shouldn't we go someplace . . . nicer?"

"Nope. Office romances should begin in the office. It's a rule. Besides, if we're a total disaster, at least I can catch up on some paperwork."

And he burst out laughing.

But they weren't a disaster.

In the darkness of the portal, she turned to him, lifting her face to his, and they kissed. Warily at first, like the strangers they were. But only for a moment. And then they seemed to meld, to

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flow together, as though they'd kissed a thousand times before. And would again.

They drew back for a moment, stunned by the depth of their delight. And the power of it. But when they began again, there was no holding back.

There was nothing remotely romantic about the office, barely room for two on the narrow rollaway. It didn't matter. In the fumbling haste of abandon, blankets on the floor served as well as a bed of roses.

Their first encounter finished quickly; they'd both been alone too long. The second time continued for hours, or so it seemed, and was far more deeply satisfying.

And there was a moment in the midst of their fevered fumbling when she lifted his face from her throat, and her eyes met his, and held.

"I've been waiting for you," she whispered.

"I know."

Something snapped him awake. Wasn't sure what. Realized they were still tangled in the blankets on the floor of the office, their bodies spooned together, still naked, a perfect fit, warm, and very natural.

"Awake?" she whispered into the nape of his neck.

"Thought I heard something."

"An old building, settling. Or the bats. Or ghosts walking, take your pick."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I've never met one," she said. "Never met anybody from Uruguay either. Which doesn't mean no one lives there. I have to leave soon."

"Why?"

"You know why. If there's any talk about us, I'll lose all credibility. We'll be a job-site joke."

"I guess you're right. How soon?"

"Not that soon," she murmured, snuggling closer. He started to turn, then froze. This time they both heard it clearly, a scraping sound from somewhere overhead. Her nails bit into his shoulder. "What was that?"

"I don't know," he said, sitting up, pulling on his jeans. "But I don't think it was somebody from Uruguay."

Barefoot, shirtless, clutching an unlit flashlight and a length of two-by-four for a weapon, Shea crept up the bell tower's narrow spiral staircase. Slowing near the top, he saw a figure outlined against the starlight through the louvers. He switched on his flashlight.

The boy whirled. The fireplug teen, one of the basketball players from the lot. Dressed in a black Raiders T-shirt, his black jeans tucked into combat boots. Wearing a cellphone headset, camouflage binoculars slung from his neck.

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"What are you doing up here?" Shea asked.

"Same as you, my damn job. What you gonna do with that board, white boy? Clock me? I don't think so." Sweeping his palm across his boot top with a single fluid motion, the kid came up with an Arkansas pigsticker, eight-incher, the blade flickering like heat lightning as he shifted it from hand to hand.

If Shea was impressed, he managed to conceal it. "So what are you, some kind of a lookout? For what?"

"The Man, white bread, what you think? You can spot cops soon as they cross the river from up here."

"Not anymore. This church is a construction zone and you're leavin', sport. Now. We can go a round if you want, and maybe you'll cut me up or I'll bust you up, but it won't change anything. This gig's over. For good."

"Razor won't think so."

"It doesn't matter what he thinks. Find another lookout. How'd you get up here, anyway?"

"Same way I'm goin'." The kid grinned. Sheathing the blade in his boot, he grabbed a rope, scrambled through the louver, and rappelled down the line to the roof at the rear of the belfry.

"Razor ain't gonna like this," the kid yelled up at him as he trotted across the rooftop to a second rope lashed to a vent pipe. "Y'all better finish this place in a hurry. You gon' need a church for ya funeral!"

Shea was waiting in Paddy Ryan's parking lot at seven when Sam and Morrie pulled in to open up.

"Mr. Shea," Sam said, climbing out of his ageing Mercedes. "You're up early."

"I need some information, guys. The black dude who gave me static the first day I was in your place? Razor? I need to talk to him."

"What about?" Sam asked, helping Morrie out of the car, handing him his cane.

"Keeping his people out of my building. Caught a kid up in the bell tower last night. A lookout."

"No big surprise. Razor's pretty much the man in this neighborhood."

"Times are changing."

"You plan on telling Razor that?"

"Somebody has to."

"Look, Mr. Shea, Razor stops by our place most afternoons. How about I give you a call when he shows, you can talk to him here. Might be safer."

"That's a kind offer, Sam, but you've got a nice cafe. I'd hate to see it get busted up. Just tell me where to find him."

"I can do a little better than that." He sighed. "Get in. We'll take you there."

"Bad idea. There may be trouble. You don't want to be in the

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middle of it."

"No offense, Mr. Shea, but me and Morrie were dealin' with trouble in this 'hood before you were born. And if you get crossways of Razor, we may be doin' it after you're gone. Get in."

"In the old days, this side of Saginaw was like the Wild West. Auto plants right across the river, three, four thousand men every shift. And when those boys got outta work, they were ready to party. Cathouses, dope houses, blind pigs. Every block had 'em. All organized. The Five Families ran things then. Sicilians. Everybody paid them."

"Including you?"

"You bet. Anybody who didn't would just . . . disappear. No muss, no fuss. Not like now, with crazy gangbangers shootin' up the streets. This is the place," he said, easing the old Benz to the curb. "Most of these boys know me, so let me do the talking, okay?"

"Sam, I'd rather you didn't—" His voice died as Morrie popped open the glove box and handed Sam a battered Army .45 automatic. Jacking a round in the chamber, Sam shoved the gun under his shirt.

"Feels like old times," the old Irishman grinned, climbing out. "Can't afford to lose you, Mr. Shea. You folks are the best customers we've had in years. Wait here, Morrie. Too many steps." Morrie nodded, but said nothing. As usual.

The crack house looked ordinary, a run-down three-story tenement backed up to the river. But if you looked closer, the first two floors were completely closed off, windows boarded up, doors reinforced with metal plates. A single outside stairway was the only access to the top floor, and as Shea followed Sam up the steps, he realized the top riser was hinged, held in place by a steel rod that disappeared into the wall. A single tug would drop the flight like the drawbridge to an ancient castle. And anybody on it would plunge thirty feet to the concrete below. Crude, but damned effective.

Didn't have to knock. A door opened when they reached the top and a giant stepped out on the landing, six-six, probably four hundred pounds, wearing black camouflage. An AK-47 assault rifle cradled in his arms.

Didn't say a word. Nodded at Sam, patted Shea down for weapons, then waved them by.

Dark as a saloon inside, all business. Armed man in the shadows of each corner. Desk against one wall, small bar at the other. Razor was behind the bar, arms folded, wearing his black pirate bandanna, wraparound shades despite the dimness of the room.

"Wanna drink, gents?" he asked. "Might be your last."

"No drinks, just talk," Sam said. "Mr. Shea here caught a kid in the Chapel bell tower last night. He could have been hurt up there. It's got to stop."

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"Maybe I should just stop the construction instead. Right now."

"Wouldn't work. It's a big project, Razor, they'd just send a replacement for Shea and my people would come for you. They know I'm here."

"Your people." Razor snorted. "Don't make me laugh. Any hard guys you used to know are either dead or usin' walkers like Morrie."

"Not all of us," Sam said. "I'm still here."

"Not for long, you keep pushin' your luck, Sam. But seems to me Shea here is the one with the problem. Considerin' what happened to the last guy wanted to remodel that church."

"What are you talking about?" Dan asked.

"Black Luke," Sam said.

"He's right," Razor continued. "Ol' Luke had the same big ideas as you. Did you know that? Claimed he was gonna grow the Black Chapel all over that block. But in the end, only ground he needed was a hole, six by two. That's all any man needs, white bread. Even you."

"C'mon, Razor, you're smarter than this," Sam pleaded. "Why make problems? Move your boys down a block. The crackheads will still find you. And when Shea finishes those new condos, maybe you'll get some upscale trade."

"If the new guy runs the Black Chapel anything like Black Luke, I'll be doin' great business. And that's the only reason I'm lettin' you keep working, Shea."

"You're not letting me do anything. I'm here till the job's done."

"Dawg, you keep crowdin' me, you could be here a lot longer than that. Like forever. Now you'd best get steppin', the both of ya, before I change my mind."

Work was already under way at the Chapel when Shea got back. Lydia was waiting anxiously for him in the office.

"Are you all right? I expected you to come back for help."

"I had help, the Ryans went with me."

"Two old men for backup?"

"Actually, Sam was pretty damn good. I don't think we'll have any more trespassers in the bell tower. What are you doing?"

"Keeping busy to keep from worrying myself crazy. I want you to take a look at something. That picture, the one of Pastor Black ranting, where the windows look like a row of tombstones? It's not just an optical illusion. I realized that what made it seem so real were these shadow lines across the last two."

"Yeah, they almost look like names."

"They are names, or one of them is. I enlarged it. The windows are partly open and what we're seeing is the reflection of a name. Gretchen Hurlburt. Not a common name, probably German. But the only record I could find of a Gretchen Hurlburt was an on-line obituary in the Castle Library genealogy section. She died in Saginaw

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in nineteen-oh-eight. Her funeral and interment were at St. Denis."

"So?"

"Dan, a hundred years ago, the Black Chapel *was* St. Denis. According to her obituary, she was buried here."

"Here? Where?"

"Apparently somewhere near that window since her stone's reflected in it."

"Could the name be etched on the glass? Sometimes donors' names are etched on windows or on wall plaques."

"I thought of that, but it's slanted the wrong way. No, I think it's the reflection of a real gravestone."

"You're talking about a cemetery, then. She wouldn't be alone. But if there was a graveyard, it should be on the original blueprints, right?"

"That's another problem. There aren't any drawings. Not even at City Hall."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. According to the logbooks, the Chapel blueprints disappeared around the time of Reverend Black's death. Maybe a reporter was doing research and didn't return them, who knows? But they're definitely gone. I got most of my data from photographs and old articles I found in the *Saginaw News* morgue."

"Do any of the photographs show a cemetery?"

"None I could find. But most of them are wedding pictures or christenings, taken on the church steps or inside. No one takes pictures of a parking lot."

"Maybe not, but I know just the man to ask."

"A graveyard?" Sam Ryan said, surprised. "Where?"

"We think there may have been one behind the Chapel where the parking lot is now," Lydia said. "Do you remember it?"

"No, I—wait a minute. I believe there was a cemetery there back in the day. Small one, years ago. The Dazers moved it to make room for parking when they first took over the Chapel. Do you remember when that was, Morrie? Mid 'fifties, wasn't it?"

His brother nodded.

"The 'fifties?" Lydia echoed doubtfully. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, 'fifty-five or -six, I think. Dug up the old graves, leveled the lot, and paved it over. Put up the baskets later on for neighborhood kids. Only decent thing Luke ever did. Why? Restoration doesn't mean you gotta bring the old cemetery back, does it?"

"No, we're just trying to learn as much about the building as possible."

"To make it what it was, you mean? Personally, I think you're making a mistake. People love to talk about the good ol' days, but lady, the only days that place had were bad and worse."

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"How does one move a cemetery?" Lydia asked as they crossed the street to the Chapel. "What's involved?"

"It's complicated. First you need a disinterment permit from the Health Department, then a licensed vault company has to open the graves. They recover the caskets or remains, seal them in new vaults for reburial, then the Health Department inspects the site and certifies it for use."

"Very impressive. How do you know all that?"

"When family farms are broken up into subdivisions we often find old burial plots on the property. They have to be moved."

"Well, this cemetery may have been moved, but not when Sam said it was."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have crime-scene photos on file, taken at the time of Luke's murder. A few show police cars parked on the side streets. The lot isn't visible, but the stone walls clearly weren't there then. Since the walls are set in the parking lot concrete, both jobs must have been done at the same time. The lot was paved after Black Luke's death, not before."

"After? But it went into receivership afterward. Nobody owned it."

"Nevertheless, that's when it was done. Sam must have the date wrong."

"Maybe, but I doubt it," Shea said, frowning. "That old man may have a few glitches brought on by the years, but I don't think a bad memory's one of them."

As Shea worked through the afternoon, his eye strayed to the stone wall every time he crossed the lot. A crude mortaring job. Nothing like the Chapel's expert craftsmanship. He promised himself to take a closer look at it when he had a few minutes.

But his time ran out.

After work, Shea hurried to his motel room to shower and change clothes before returning to the Chapel for the night watch.

But on the return trip, he had to pull over twice to let police and fire trucks pass. As he turned onto Johnstone, the streets in front of the Chapel were clogged with police cars and fire engines. Parking at Paddy Ryan's, he spotted one of the Saginaw cops who'd braced him the first day. Boyko. He trotted over.

"Jeez, Shea, who did you guys tick off? Osama Bin Laden?"

"Why? What happened?"

"A bomb is what happened. Couple of fair-sized blasts."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Not out here. We haven't been inside yet, the bomb squad's coming, but—hey! Come back here!"

Dashing up the steps to the nave, Shea checked the office first. No damage, no one inside. Even in the chaos of the nave, the blast sites were obvious, one explosion in each corner of— Only

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in three corners.

Trotting to the fourth corner on the west side of the room, he found a fist-sized glob of putty loose on the floor. C-4, plastic explosive. Military, not industrial. Crudely fused, a lace job, probably snuffed out by one of the other blasts. Looked like somebody just threw them into the room like firecrackers. An amateur. If the plastique had been tamped tightly in the corners, the whole building could have come down.

When three armored officers of the bomb squad showed up, Shea explained who he was and what he'd found. They told him to get the hell out of the building and stay out.

Yes, sir.

Outside, he found Puck. None of his crew had been injured. Everybody was gone for the day. Good.

Shea spent the next twenty minutes circling the Chapel, scanning the masonry for cracks or bulges. Nothing major. Some bricks shaken loose from the concussion, but no serious structural damage.

Except to the stone walls that lined the parking lot. The blast had cracked the mortar on the end near the building, knocking several of the stacked stones loose. Picking up one of the pieces to replace it, Shea noticed a number engraved on its surface. Nine, zero, three. There'd been letters above it at one time but they'd been obliterated by time or the blast.

He stared down at the stone, trying to understand its message. Then wheeled and pushed through the crowd lining the sidewalk, and headed across the street to Paddy Ryan's.

"Dan! Wait for me!" Lydia called, hurrying after him, catching him in the middle of the street. "What's wrong? Where are you going?"

"Wait here. There could be trouble."

"I'll take my chances," she said, falling in step beside him. "And to quote one of my heroes, when you start signing my paycheck, you can tell me what to do."

"Mr. Shea?" Sam said as Dan pushed through the door with Lydia right behind him. "We heard one helluva bang. What happened?"

"Kid stuff," Shea said. "Somebody set off a couple of blasts in the Chapel. Rough neighborhood you've got here."

"Told you that the first day."

"So you did. Funny how the Chapel's gone to wrack and ruin, local shacks are falling down, yet your place still looks great. A bit rich for this neighborhood, isn't it?"

"The 'hood wasn't always like this," Sam said cautiously. "Years ago, it was different."

"Yeah, like Dodge City, you said. Must have been wild."

"We were pretty wild ourselves, those days."

"I believe you. When you backed me against Razor, he seemed to respect you. Not a lot, but some. I think maybe you still scare him a little."

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Sam shrugged. "We're a couple of tough old Micks. You live in the Chapel district, you pick up a few tricks."

"Tricks might explain how you survived here all these years, Sam, but not why. You're the last white faces around, the neighborhood's falling apart. So why are you still here?"

Without a word, Morrie got up from his stool, limped to the door, and locked it. When he turned around, he had the Army .45 in his fist. He waved it toward the counter.

"My brother wants you to sit down, Mr. Shea. Do it. And put your hands flat on the counter. And then you'd better tell me what you think you know."

"I don't know anything for sure," Shea said, doing as he was ordered, with Lydia beside him. "But I've got some questions. Know what this is?" He tossed the shard of stone on the counter. Numbers-side up.

"It's your rock, you tell me."

"The blast knocked it loose from the wall across the parking lot. Looks like a piece of a gravestone to me. And there are a lot more pieces just like it cemented into that wall. How do you suppose broken gravestones ended up there?"

"Maybe when the Dazers moved the old cemetery—"

"The End Days Brethren never moved that cemetery, Sam, and you damn well know it. It was still there when Black Luke was killed. Maybe it's *why* he was killed, I don't know. That's something the law can sort out. What I do know is that *after* the murder, somebody smashed up the stones and paved over that cemetery. Maybe the same two Micks who bombed the place tonight."

"You've got that all wrong," Sam snapped.

"Then you've got thirty seconds to set me straight. I owe you that much for backing me against Razor, but no more. And tell Morrie to put that gun away. He's not gonna shoot anybody with an army of cops across the street."

"All right, all right! Hell, even when we were ganged up we never killed anybody and we're not about to start."

"You were gangsters?" Lydia asked.

"Not exactly, but we worked for 'em. Everybody did in the old days. The Five Families owned this side of the river. You had to join up to survive. We were strictly small-time but the Families were the real thing. People that crossed them disappeared. And that's where we came in."

"How do you mean?"

"Know what the tough part of a murder is, miss? The body. Without a corpse it's difficult to make a case. And we came up with a perfect place to lose bodies, the last place anyone would look. A ghetto cemetery that nobody used anymore."

"And Reverend Black found out about it?"

"Found out, hell. Luke was on our payroll for years. A nice little

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scam, kind of a midnight mortuary service. Until Luke got too deep into the booze and started believing all that crap he was preaching."

"What did he preach, exactly?" Lydia asked.

"About the End Days coming and him being the new messiah. All of a sudden he got these big plans, started talking about expanding the Black Chapel. Told us to get the stiffs off his holy ground or he'd blow the whistle. Took himself way too seriously. And didn't take the people we worked for seriously enough."

"They killed him, didn't they? His death wasn't a murder/suicide."

"I wouldn't know," Sam said carefully. "A coroner's inquest returned that verdict all legal and proper and it doesn't matter anyway. It was a long time ago."

"Yes, it was. So why are you still here?"

"Black Luke's curse," the old man spat. "We're stuck. Luke's death solved one problem but dropped a bigger one in our laps. The banks foreclosed on the Chapel and put it on the market. We were afraid new owners might want to move the cemetery so we brought in a crew one night, busted up the stones, made a wall out of them, and paved the whole thing over. Put up the basketball nets for camouflage. Locals figured the banks did it, but those people never came down here, never even noticed. To them the Chapel was just another rundown property in a rough part of town. We figured we'd wait for things to settle down, then move on."

"Why didn't you?"

"Progress, Mr. Shea. They kept inventin' new ways to identify bodies. Blood types, dental records, DNA. If they turn them stiffs up now, they'll be able to identify some of them, maybe all of them. Won't take 'em long to figure out how they got here. So we're stuck guarding the place, like old junkyard dogs. Not much of a life, but better than life in prison."

"You didn't set off those blasts, did you?" Shea said slowly.

"Hell no! Your project is our last hope. With the church open again and the cemetery forgotten, we can walk away. But now, if the walls are damaged and they find the stones . . . well. You found us, didn't you?"

"What are you going to do with us?" Lydia asked.

"Nothin', miss. We're amateur undertakers, not killers. I've always known this day would come. The penalty for livin' too long. But if you figure you owe us anything, Shea, we could use a few days to get clear. We've served our time here. I don't want Morrie to die in jail. Please. Just a few days."

"What are we going to do?" Lydia asked as they walked back to the turmoil around the Chapel.

"Go to the police," Shea said. "What else can we do?"

"After all these years? Would it be so wrong to just . . . let them go?"

"What about the people they helped bury? Do we forget them, too?"

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As they approached the police lines, Reverend Arroyo pushed through the crowd, his creamy suit smudged, tie askew. "We need to talk, over here," he said nervously, leading them to the lee of his Cadillac.

"What's wrong?" Lydia asked.

"I have to make a statement to the press in a minute and we need to be on the same page. Obviously, the bombing will force us to close down the project for a time—"

"Hold on," Shea said. "I've been inside and the damage appears pretty superficial. Once the police finish their investigation, we could be up and running in a few days."

"Even if you're right, the hatred revealed by this attack has caused me to reconsider the entire project. Our intent was to help this neighborhood, but since so many locals clearly object to our restoration project, perhaps we need a new plan. One so ambitious that they'll rejoice in it."

"How ambitious?" Lydia asked.

"Instead of trying to recreate the past, we'll embrace the future. Rebuild the whole block into a marvelous new community centered around a newly expanded church with a state-of-the-art broadcast facility. Four hundred apartments instead of the sixty we planned. A parking structure across the street joined by an overhead walkway. It will take a massive fund-raising effort, but I'm sure my flock will open their hearts and purses to continue God's work here on an even greater scale. We can go over the details later, right now we just need a joint statement for the press."

"If you want me to say the damage is too serious to continue the project, I can't do that," Shea said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not true. The blasts barely scratched the Chapel."

"The damage may be more serious than you think, Mr. Shea. In any case, I'm shutting down the project tonight, and that's the announcement I intend to make. If you feel you can't endorse it, perhaps you should withdraw from the team."

"I either back your story or I'm fired? Is that it?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, but since the project is going on hiatus, I'll understand if you wish to seek other employment. It's my fault. I shouldn't have hired such a small firm for the job."

Lydia started to protest, but Shea waved her off. "The blasts went off an hour ago and you've already got a whole new project in mind? That's quick thinking. Maybe too quick."

"What are you implying?"

"That it's not a new plan. It was your plan all along. You got grant money to restore a historical structure but now this very convenient blast makes the project impossible. Since you didn't mention returning any cash, I assume you plan to keep it and raise even more for a bigger project, one nobody would have green-

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lighted in the beginning."

"You're mistaken, Mr. Shea, and I warn you, if you carry any part of this fantasy to the authorities, my ministry will sue you for slander, incompetence, and anything else our lawyers can come up with."

"You'd better not," Lydia said. "I'll back his story all the way."

"Then we'll sue you as well," Arroyo said. "Win or lose, you'll both spend years in court defending yourselves at a thousand an hour. Perhaps you can afford it, Mrs. Ford, but I doubt Mr. Shea can. So why don't we settle this like reasonable people? Here and now?"

"What do you have in mind?" Shea asked.

"I'll announce that the project's shutting down. You'll pull out quietly with no public statement. In return, I'll see that you and your men collect the full value of your contract."

"So I take the money and run? And keep my mouth shut?"

"That's a bit crude, but not inaccurate."

"Of all the incredible gall—" Lydia began.

"Deal," Shea said.

"What?" Lydia gasped. "You can't be serious!"

"I have no choice, Lydia. He's right, I can't afford a long court fight. I've got a crew to feed."

"A very prudent decision," Arroyo said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm already late for the press conference. By the way, Mrs. Ford, since the new project won't be a restoration, your services are no longer required. You're fired. God bless you both." And he was gone.

"I can't believe you're going to let him buy you off," Lydia said.

"What am I supposed to do? Tell the law I think Arroyo had his own building bombed as part of a fund-raising scam? And when they ask me for proof, what do I say then?"

"And that's it? You're really going to take the money and run?"

"Arroyo owes my men that money and they need it. Throwing it back in his face would be a grand gesture, but it won't buy many groceries come winter. As far as running goes, to be honest, the sooner I see this place in my rearview mirror, the happier I'll be."

"Damn it, Dan, it's wrong! You can't let Arroyo get away with this!"

"I don't think he will."

"But if you won't go to the police—"

"Black Luke had big plans for this place, too. It didn't work out for him. It won't for Arroyo, either."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. It's just a feeling I have. There's something wrong about this place, Lydia. I've felt it from the beginning. I told you once that buildings talk to me. This one's saying get the hell out. While you can."

Dan Shea and his men packed up and headed north to Valhalla the next day. A rare treat for a construction crew, a vacation paid in full by Arroyo's ministry for a job they'd barely begun.

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Shea spent the autumn months working alone in the golden forests of the north, felling logs, cutting them to size, then snaking them out of the woods with a borrowed horse. Building a new addition onto his father's house.

He did all of the labor by hand, measuring his talent and abilities against the skilled work his grandfather did long before he was born. But he didn't finish the job by himself.

Around Christmas, an interior designer arrived to work on the project. She took a room at a local bed and breakfast but spent most of her time at Shea's home, helping with the remodeling job. Small towns being as they are, rumors sprang up about the two. But died just as quickly.

The lady in question is a bit older, you see, and very much a lady. And in the northern counties, Dan Shea and his roughneck crew aren't people to cross. Besides, Shea and his lady are so obviously happy together that the gossip seemed pointless.

In the spring, down below, a new construction crew from Detroit began work on the Arroyo Chapel expansion. But when they excavated the parking lot to pour the new foundations, the shock and revulsion of what they found brought the project to a screaming halt.

Saginaw police immediately taped off the site as a crime scene while state forensic techs from Lansing tried to sort out the carnage. It took months just to disinter the bodies, let alone identify them all. Perhaps they never will.

By then, Arroyo's project was as dead as the corpses buried beneath the Chapel parking lot. His financing evaporated overnight. Why build apartments in a place no one will ever want to live?

After a few unhappy weeks in bankruptcy court, the reverend fled to Florida, flat broke.

Leaving the Black Chapel much as it was. Empty. Abandoned.

By night, streetwise lookouts still prowl its bell tower. But not even hardcore junkies will go inside the great nave anymore.

Too dangerous, they say. Perhaps the blast made the walls unstable. Loose bricks and fixtures seem to fall with deadly accuracy. Locals claim the Chapel is seeking new tenants for its ravaged cemetery.

The truth is, bone deep, people are simply terrified of the place. And they should be.

Its paint is peeling away like rotting skin now, but it makes no difference. The bricks beneath are stained black as sin.

And inside, voices echo in the cavernous murk of the ruined nave. The mad ranting of Black Luke, answered by the murmurs of the unquiet dead.

So it remains. A shattered hulk looming over a gutted graveyard in a forgotten neighborhood. A malevolent structure so dark that even on the sunniest days, it seems to stand in shadow. As though the evil within is bleeding the very light from the air. ●

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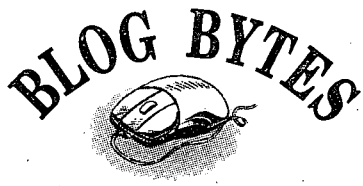

by Ed Gorman

Here are some blogs well worth reading.

January Magazine offers a sophisticated, knowing look at some of the key novels and story collections being published today. Editor Linda L. Richards and Senior Editor J. Kingston Pierce give mystery readers the sort of reviews that are easy to read but also thoughtful in their commentary. *January* has increasingly become one of the go-to places for influential pieces on both books and trends. There are also features, interviews, and retro reviews. One of my favorites. **http://www.janmag.com**

Thrillingdetective.com traces the history of the private eye novel in print, film, radio, magazine, and comics. Publisher-Editor Kevin Smith is a fine writer and has gathered other fine writers to provide his ever-growing reader base with everything from original fiction to interesting polls. Reviews, essays, historical overviews—the site is packed with goodies for readers who like their material with a little tough thrown in. You can spend several nights engrossed by the various subgenre histories you'll find here. **http://www.thrillingdetective.com**

Sandra Scoppettone's Writing Thoughts provides some of the most real and brutal truths about writing I've ever read anywhere. Sometimes the writing goes well and Sandra is happy (and we're happy for her) and sometimes it doesn't go so well and she's unhappy (and we're unhappy for her). Sandra is an important and impressive novelist and reading her entries about how her current novel is progressing is a fascinating look at the creative process. This is much like a reality show in print. Excellent work here. **http://sandrascoppettone.blogspot.com**

MysteryNet.com is a triumph of intelligence, enthusiasm, and sweeping knowledge of every aspect of the mystery world. Famous authors in interviews and essays; unmatched interactive elements; original fiction; the most up-to-date events calendar anywhere, and so many other features there's no room to list them here. All served up in the slickest package to be found on a mystery site. Given the general appeal of this savvy and eminently readable site, I imagine it gets more hits from the average reader (as opposed to hard-core fan) than any other blog. **http://www.mysterynet.com/books**

Ed Gorman's own blog entries appear on *Mystery*File* on-line. **http://www.mysteryfile.com**

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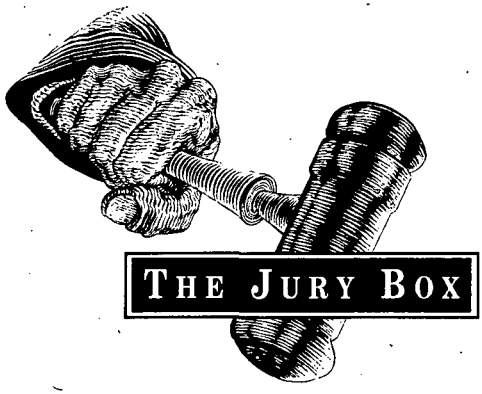

by Jon L. Breen

Unsurprisingly, given the 21st century's inauspicious beginning, many crime writers are still setting their books in the 20th. Some would like to avoid such spoilsport modern features as cell phones, the Internet, and constantly advancing criminalist forensics. However, the five last-century historicals considered below are set long enough ago ('20s through '50s) to prove they're up to more than that.

*** Paul Malmont: *The Chinatown Death Cloud Peril,* Simon and Schuster, $24. This first novel makes good use of a promising gimmick: take some 1930s pulp magazine writers—in starring roles, Walter B. Gibson, Lester Dent, and L. Ron Hubbard; in supporting roles, H.P. Lovecraft, "Doc" Smith, and an ex-Navy officer using the alias Otis P. Driftwood—and immerse them in a pulp magazine plot, complete with hidden treasure, weird science, zombies, and opium dens. The style fits the story. "God," prays one writer, "if you get me out of this, I promise I'll never abuse adverbs again." Only a few pages later, Malmont abuses one himself: a character is described as "sobbing almost inconsolably in her delight." The author cites many good sources on pulp history, but he must have missed Francis M. Nevins's biography of one minor character: the factual details on Cornell Woolrich are off the mark.

*** Hal Glatzer: *The Last Full Measure,* Perseverance/Daniel, $13.95. In the third of a series that offers lively writing and impeccable period detail, musician Katy Green accepts a gig on the Hawaii-bound *Lurline* in November 1941 and encounters shipboard murder, an island treasure hunt, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The final chapters will satisfy both the thriller reader and the fan of fair-play detection.

** Carolyn Haines: *Penumbra,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $23.95. In 1952 Mississippi, Marlena Bramlett, the young wife of a wealthy citizen, is brutally injured in the course of an adulterous picnic, and her six-year-old daughter disappears.

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Jade Dupree, a half-black hairdresser who also prepares corpses for the local mortician, is Marlena's not-officially-acknowledged-but-known-to-the-whole-town half sister. Local deputy Frank Kimball is a World War II veteran who sees dead people. That's only part of the large cast of this ambitious Southern gothic with supernatural overtones. While too many stock characters and clichés undermine its early promise, it's undeniably involving.

** Sandra Scoppettone: *Too Darn Hot,* Ballantine, $24.95. New York private eye Faye Quick, minding the store while her boss is off fighting World War II, looks for a missing soldier at his girlfriend's request and finds the naked body of another man in her quarry's hotel room. The good-humored, colloquial first-person narrative reminded me of Robert Campbell's Jimmy Flannery, and the '40s references are spot-on. However, the initially intriguing plot fizzles out, and some will find character names borrowed from '40s actors (e.g. Van Widmark) more distracting than charming.

** Kerry Greenwood: *Flying Too High,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Phryne Fisher—flapper sleuth, nude model, and wing-walking stunt pilot of 1920s Melbourne—takes on her second case, first published in Australia in 1990. Her two investigations concern the death of an abusive husband and father and the kidnapping of a preternaturally precocious six-year-old girl. There's fun along the way, but here, too, the ending is a severe letdown.

**** Loren D. Estleman: *Nicotine Kiss,* Forge, $23.95. Detroit's Amos Walker, always a man out of his time, has moved into the 21st century but clearly would be happier in the 20th. Though recovering from wounds received in a shooting, Walker plays out the P.I. code by searching for the vanished career criminal who took him to the hospital. In a complex case involving cigarette smuggling, counterfeiting, and the Department of Homeland Security, Estleman again proves himself one of the finest stylists in the mystery genre.

**** Gerald Seymour: *Traitor's Kiss,* Overlook, $24.95. In a terrific example of post-Cold War spy thriller, old and new ways of thinking in the British intelligence establishment clash over efforts to rescue a Russian naval officer whose identity as an agent for Britain has been compromised. Downbeat, suspenseful, and intelligent work from a practiced hand.

*** Barbara Allan: *Antiques Roadkill,* Kensington, $22. Thirtyish divorcée Brandy Borne returns to her Iowa hometown, where her theatrical and slightly mad mother Vivian has sold the family heirlooms to an unscrupulous antiques dealer, who is subsequently murdered. One suspects this is intended as a send-up of the amateur-detective cozy genre: the antiques tips at the end of each chapter are facetious; the chapter titles use enough puns for a whole *(continued on page 63)*

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EL TRAMEGRA

by Margaret Maron

From: RTramegra
To: SigridHarald
Date: 16 May
Subject: Je Suis Arrivé en France&!

My deqr Sigrid:

So your mother and Mac have eloped, if one cqn call taking a cab over to City Hall eloping? When fast cars and crossing stqte lines aren't involved, where is the romance and drama of an elopement? And one can hardly say it was unexpected, especially if Anne took you along as a zitness:

Margaret Maron's 12th Deborah Knott mystery, *Winter's Child,* has just been published by The Mysterious Press. Most readers know that before she created Deborah Knott, the bestselling author penned several books in her Sigrid Harald series. The protagonist of this new story is Sigrid Harald's housemate, Roman Tramegra.

Nevertheless, although it was two days past the fact before I read your message, I immediately raised a glqss of very good Riesling toward New York; Todqy, I learn from your lqtest message that I should have been facing east. Hanoi? What an odd place to honeymoon. I fear all those years as a globe-hopping photojournalist have given Anne a taste for the *outre.* Your old boss may no longer be a homicide captain, but he isn't out of danger, is he?

As for Germany, the weather was cold and rainy and you saw how horrible it was for me to write with the Y and Z transposed on the keyboards I found along the way. (French keyboards are just as execrable. The Y is where God intended, but now the Z and W have switched positions. As have the A and Q—*Wuts qlors!* as the French would say if they had to use an American keyboard.) Happily, I leave tomorrow to join my tour group in Spain.

I still have hopes of gathering exotic local color for a chapter in my nez thriller. I've decided to put the Zall Street terrorist story aside for now and concentrate instead on the one about the international art thieves. You may have resigned from the NYPD, but that doesn't mean I shan't be picking your brqins about what you've learned about the art world since inheriting poor Oscar's paintings. After all, my dear, what's a housemate for if not to share esoteric knowledge?

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In the meantime, it's off to Bqrcelona1 Let us hope the Spanish keyboard is more sensible:

Roman

From: RTramegra
To: SigridHarald
Date: 20 May
Subject: Oviedo!

Dear Sigrid:

Really thought I would have found an Internet cafe before this. What a whirlwind it's been! Barcelona—or "Barthelona," as the natives call it—was wonderful. Fantastic architecture.

As for Spanish keyboards, the letters are laid out properly—sing praises to the God of Small Things!—although some number keys have 3 symbols attached to them so as to leave space for Ñ, Ç, and ¿—none of which I plan to use.

It's a mixed bag of "wine and culture pilgrims" that I've joined and I use the term advisedly because we're going to finish up in Santiago de Compostela (loosely translated as St. James of the Starry Field) and we've already seen numerous real pilgrims in their khaki shorts, Birkenstocks, and backpacks hiking westward toward that great cathedral. Most of the group's been together these past 10 days and there are 12 of us in all, which necessitates 2 vans. Our leader, Carson Forbes, is a prof. of Modern History at Columbia. Late 40s. His assistant driver, Luis Campos, is a young Spaniard¿—some sort of relation to Forbes' wife, who was actually born in Santiago. She plans to meet us there at the end of the trip.

The other late arrivals, Lester & Millie Anderson, are mid-forties and they actually know you. Or at least they know who you are. Their real estate agency in CT represented the couple who bought Oscar's country house from you. They—the buyers—love bragging (discreetly, of course!) that a world-famous artist once owned the house.

My roommate is a Jack Daniels. ("No relatives in KY," he's quick to say.) Owns Porsche franchises in Connecticut and on Long Island. Widowed. His much-younger sister Marie and his daughter Jackie are also on the tour. Jackie's an art major due to graduate from college in December and she's gathering material for her senior thesis. We've had several interesting chats about writing for money. (She's actually read a couple of the travel articles I wrote before I sold *Murder in Midtown* to St. Stephen's Press and is charmingly complimentary.) Marie is only a few years older than Jackie, and they are more like sisters than aunt and niece. Was a

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little surprised that Jack would rather room with a stranger than pay the singles supplement, but I guess that's how the rich stay rich. By counting pennies. Just between you and me, however, he counts them so closely that it's starting to rasp on the rest of us. Every time we share a meal not covered by the tour, poor Jackie and Marie are mortified when the bill arrives because Jack always insists that everyone's share be calculated to the last euro instead of just splitting it evenly.

There are two sets of Brockmans. Barbara and Richard are 50-something attorneys from Boston; Philip and Kate are his nephew and wife, also attorneys. Like me, the Andersons and the Daniels women are here for art and culture, so Luis drives us to the museums and churches. Jackie has enough Spanish that she sits up front with him and translates whenever his rather good English falters. They seem *muy simpático.*

Jack and the Brockmans are our wine people, so they go off with Forbes almost every morning to tour some winery or other and come back bearing bottles to share with the rest of us . . . well, the Brockmans and Forbes share. Jack has a hard time uncorking any of his.

So far, nothing has sparked a good plot for my next book, although I'm taking lots of notes. The differences between our cultures are fascinating. No billboards outside the towns and very few inside. The Spanish are much more into conservation than we are. For instance, the round flush button atop the toilet is divided into two unequal parts. You press the small part if you only need a small flush, the larger for more, and both together for a really big flush. Think how much water New York could save if we adopted such toilets!

As for electricity, we've only seen one working windmill like the one Don Quixote tilted with, but there are wind farms all over this northern part of Spain—row after row of 3-bladed *aerogeneradores* topping tall columns. When we enter our hotel rooms, one of us must insert his key card before the light switches will work. No going out and forgetting to turn everything off because as soon as we take our key card from the slot, the room and bath go dark. Public restrooms are on a timer. Take too long and you're washing your hands in the dark.

Yesterday was the last of a 3-night stay at a country hotel near Vitoria, what they call a *"parador."* These are state-owned renovated historical places, minor palaces, chateaux, etc. The large room Jack and I shared had a sitting alcove that overlooked the broad lawn.

At a modern art museum yesterday, I came face-to-face with an Oscar Nauman plaster print. Without thinking, I blurted out that I had known him. I assure you that I said not a SINGLE word about you and he being lovers at the time of his death—I would

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NEVER talk about that to ANYone!—but Jackie was eager to hear as much as I could tell her about the man behind the art. She's going to E me a paper she wrote on him last year.

On the way back, we shopped for a picnic supper at the local *mercado* (grocery). Amusing to see unfamiliar products with familiar names like Kraft and Pillsbury attached to them. We bought roasted chickens, cheese, olives, etc., etc. The others joined us in the late afternoon with bottles of Rioja and we feasted like kings under the trees.

Jack later complained that this wasn't his idea of a 3-star meal, but Jackie was having such a good time that he kept his mouth shut until we were back in our room. She's a nice child, very pretty, and Luis is obviously smitten. At least it's obvious to most of us. Jack seems oblivious, which Marie assures us is a good thing. Marie seems to walk around Jack—I've learned that he's her boss as well as her brother—but she's young enough to be sympathetic to this summer romance and she covered for Jackie last night so that the kids could sneak off to a street concert.

Now we're in Oviedo. Our hotel is near the town center, directly across from a beautiful lush green park. I know you're not much for nature, dear Sigrid, but even you would be charmed by the huge old trees and the peacocks. More later. Roman

From: RTramegra
To: SigridHarald
Date: 21 May
Subject: Cervantes

It's the "Year of the Book" over here—the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote.* I never did read it all the way through. Did you? Last night, some of us went to a *zarzuela* performance, which is a cross between opera and a Gilbert and Sullivan. As best I could understand, what we saw was a musical version of how Cervantes was inspired to create the character of *El Quijote,* as he is often called.

Luis and Jackie sat several rows in front of us and their heads were together the whole evening. Ah, young love! Good thing Jack opted to stay in and watch a soccer match with Forbes. On the walk back to the hotel, Marie told me that she is Jack's second-in-command. Jackie has no interest in the business, but Marie is such an enthusiast that she *almost* convinced me that I need a Porsche even though you and I live but 2 blocks from the subway. If only St. Stephen's would promote my book more vigorously!! I'll bet John Grisham and Mary Higgins Clark can afford Porsches.

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Despite her business acumen, Marie is as much a romantic as I. She thinks that Luis would be perfect for Jackie. He's more cosmopolitan and educated than I at first realized and can talk to her about the art and music she loves. Both women are afraid that Jack will try to drive him away if he notices because he has his heart set on seeing her married to someone who'll run the business so it can grow and prosper. He and Marie grew up poor and he has all the pride of a self-made man who wants to keep what he's built intact. Marie says he's like the dragon that's imprisoned the princess in a tower, but Jackie's young and she's been a willing prisoner thus far. She's quite aware of his wishes and seems to love him too much to wish to hurt him. I think she feels guilty that she's not the son he wanted.

Marie's enlisted my help to keep Jack from seeing how intense they've become. She wants them to have enough time and breathing space to be sure that this is not a mere summer fling. Two weeks is a short time, but I've seen too many happy marriages based on 3 dates to say they don't know each other well enough. Indeed, the Andersons are also in on our little conspiracy because he proposed a week after they first met in college 26 years ago.

Marie's concern doesn't surprise any of us. Jack is SUCH a control freak. Honestly, every time we sit down to dinner, he's quick to decide that Jackie and Marie don't really want paella or shrimp. He tells the waiter, "We'll all three have the fish and asparagus." If it's a meal that isn't covered in the tour cost, he'll say, "Why don't you girls split an entrée? You shouldn't be eating that much anyhow."

Not that either is fat. But they do worry about their figures. You, dear Sigrid, are the only woman I ever met who doesn't. R.

From: RTramegra
To: SigridHarald
Date: 22 May
Subject: Sidra Festival!

Today was Oviedo's Cider Festival. You pay 3 euros for a bright green neckerchief, a clear plastic tumbler, and a scorecard. Then you go down the street, stopping at every tavern to sample and rate the hard cider. The Asturias district is proud of its native drink, but personally, they can keep my part. It's both tart and flat at the same time. The attraction is that your server is supposed to hold your tumbler in one hand as low as possible and pour from a bottle that's held as high as possible in the other hand. This bit of drama is supposed to insure full aeration and make the cider foam up in your glass like beer. According to Luis, experienced servers never spill a drop. Do NOT believe it!! By noontime, the street was sticky with puddles of *sidra;* and even though you only get a couple of inches of

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it per sample, the stuff is potent enough to send you reeling through streets jammed elbow to shoulder with fellow cider enthusiasts.

Saw Luis and Jackie kissing beneath a green umbrella. Marie saw them, too. Behind Jack's back, she signaled to me and we immediately distracted Jack by steering him in a different direction, which wasn't difficult, as much cider as he had sampled. Marie persuaded him to go back to the hotel with her and sleep it off.

I plan to incorporate this romance into my art thriller. Not that I have a plot yet. Did I tell you that the younger Brockmans own a small Oscar Nauman oil landscape that he painted down near the Portuguese border?

I'll write to you from Santiago. Now that I'm used to the Spanish keyboard, it would be a shame to waste it. R.

From: RTramegra
To: SigridHarald
Date: 24 May
Subject: Santiago de Compostela

We have reached the end of our pilgrimage. Everything in the great cathedral is gold: crucifixes, orbs, statues, etc. Distasteful and tragic when one thinks of the cost in human lives to wrest this gold from the Aztecs. There's too much blood on the golden statue of St. James for me to want to hug it as do so many pilgrims. R.

From: RTramegra
To: SigridHarald
Date: 25 May
Subject: Still Santiago

How perceptive you are, dear Sigrid! Yes, I'm afraid I was QUITE depressed when I wrote you yesterday. Still am, for that matter. And it wasn't merely the South American gold. Modern Spanish gold has divided our young lovebirds and Jackie is heartbroken. Luis has left our party and Forbes's wife has replaced him as our driver.

Things began to go sour immediately after Oviedo. Barbara Brockman, one of the wine-loving lawyers from Boston, had bought several of the coins that were struck to commemorate 400 *años de El Quijote*. Two were pure gold escudos, worth 800€ each, the rest were sterling silver reales. She had them in the bottom of her purse and sometime during the last three days all 6 coins disappeared. Of course, we thought she'd either been careless or else a hotel maid or a pickpocket had taken them because she's always

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setting her purse down and going off and leaving it so that her niece or one of us has to run back for it.

Then Marie bought a gorgeous—and rather expensive—jet necklace, which she left under the seat of the van when we stopped for lunch at a restaurant on the northern coast. It disappeared and both vans had been parked right outside our window through the whole meal. No stranger could have taken it. Unfortunately, Marie didn't discover it was missing till we were unloading the vans at our hotel in Santiago.

Barbara wasn't too upset about her loss because the coins can be replaced and she has travel insurance (the rich really ARE different from you and me), but Marie's necklace was one of a kind and she does NOT have travel insurance. The police were summoned and we all insisted upon being searched. The 2 golden escudos are still missing, but the 4 silver coins were under the front floor mat of the van that Luis has been driving and the necklace was in his jacket pocket!!!

Of course, he swore he had no idea how they got there, and that someone else must have planted the necklace in his jacket, which had indeed hung on the back of his seat for most of the drive. I suppose 1600 euros worth of gold coins is a big temptation to a poor student. Not that he really is, as Mrs. Forbes was quick to tell us when she linked up with us yesterday. He's the son of her cousin here in Santiago, a middle-class businessman who believes in the work ethic for his children.

Jackie can't stop crying, but for once, she's standing up to Jack, who wants to whisk her back to Long Island immediately. She refuses to believe in Luis's guilt and accused Jack of framing him in order to break them up. But Jack says he would have had no serious objection to the romance if he had noticed, which he swears he didn't. He claims that he was rather impressed by Luis, that they'd shared a bottle of wine in Oviedo, where he learned that Luis is studying business, but spends his summers driving for Forbes because he likes cars. "He knows Porsches from bumper to tailpipe and he asked some pretty sharp questions about the franchise. Would I rather see my daughter with an American? Hell yes! But if this is the guy she wanted, I would have made him the son I never had. He could've doubled our sales to Spanish-speaking customers."

Jackie didn't want to believe him, but Marie confirmed that he'd told her pretty much the same when she walked him back to the hotel after the cider festival. And that was before the gold coins went missing. I could just *weep* for what might have been, but if Luis is a thief, better to know it now. Poor Jackie. She's still convinced of his innocence but who else could possibly have a motive to discredit him? Roman

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From: RTramegra
To: SigridHarald
Date: 26 May
Subject: You were RIGHT!!

Dear, *dear* Sigrid:

When I read your one-word reply late last night, I couldn't imagine how on earth you reached that conclusion, and when I got Jackie alone after breakfast this morning and put it to her, she was equally puzzled. Still, the more she thought about it, the more she wondered. She pleaded a headache and told the others to please go away and let her sleep it off. It was my job to convince everyone that we simply HAD to drive both vans down to La Guardia for lunch and then make a quick sidetrip across the Minho River so that we could truthfully say we'd been to Portugal. Even the Brockmans agreed when I reminded them that they could photograph the same scene that Oscar once painted.

This gave Jackie several hours to make a thorough search and when we returned, she was waiting for us in front of the hotel with the two gold escudos clutched in her hand. She had found them in a jar of cold cream in Marie's toiletries bag.

How clever of you to realize that if Jack was telling the truth, Marie was the only one left with a motive to break them up. Once Jack confided in her that he liked Luis, and once she realized how qualified that young man was, Marie knew she would soon be pushed aside if the match actually came off. She would no longer be Jack's second-in-command. No more cushy family job with paid European vacations and time off whenever she wanted. Instead, she'd be back among the working wage earners, punching a time clock. An art enthusiast was no threat to her, but an art enthusiast who can read a balance sheet and knows cars?

Jack is mortified and sent her home in disgrace as soon as the Brockmans agreed not to press charges. No trouble with Luis either. He's certainly not going to sue his fiancée's aunt—yes, FIANCÉE!!! He formally proposed last night and you should see the beautiful antique ring he gave her!!! You and I are both invited to the wedding next spring out in the Hamptons. Even though I've given you all the credit, Jackie keeps calling me *Don Tramegra,* her knight in shining armor.

Home on Saturday. Still no good plot, although . . . what do you think about smuggling ancient gold artifacts out of Spain in the hubcaps of European cars? Maybe the smuggler could be a descendant of Aztecs?

R.

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The Problem of the Shepherd's Ring

by Edward D. Hoch

The long-running Sam Hawthorne series takes a new domestic turn in the following story. Hawthorne is a reader favorite not only because of his crime-solving ability but because he's sympathetic—a country doctor, once a very eligible bachelor. He finally married in "The Problem of Bailey's Buzzard" (12/02).

It was in early December of 1943, just two years after our marriage, that Annabel told me she was pregnant. (Old Dr. Sam Hawthorne paused to refill his visitor's glass before continuing his story.) Of course, I was overjoyed by the news, even though it meant bringing a child into a world ravaged by war. Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin had just met for the first time in Teheran, agreeing on a plan for the invasion of western Europe during the coming year, and we hoped the worst might soon be over.

Our good friend and Northmont's first black doctor, Lincoln Jones, had gone into obstetrics and opened his own office. He'd been slow in building a practice, but Annabel and I quickly agreed there was no one we'd trust more to deliver our first baby. Lincoln examined Annabel on Monday morning, our wedding anniversary, and estimated that the baby was due toward the end of July. She was already making plans for her assistant to take over the veterinary practice at Annabel's Ark during her confinement. I'd be forty-seven years old when my child was born, but Annabel was ten years younger, still a beauty with her blond hair and hazel eyes.

"I'll need you, Sam," she told me. "When it gets closer you'll have to cut back on your detective work."

I assured her I'd be happy to abandon it completely if Northmont would only settle down to being a quiet New England town. But that wasn't about to happen right away.

I arrived at my office the following morning, another anniversary day, but this one far from joyous. It was two years since the attack on Pearl Harbor, and I knew my nurse April would be thinking of her husband André, still fighting the war in the Pacific. I couldn't resist telling her the good news about Annabel's pregnancy and she was overjoyed. I was the godfather of her son

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Sam, named for me and now a seven-year-old second-grader, living here with his mother while they awaited his father's return from the war. When I'd finished with my news she told me Sheriff Lens was coming in to see me. I knew it wouldn't be just a social visit.

"How's it going, Doc?" he asked as he came through the door a bit after ten.

"Just fine, Sheriff. Annabel and I were out to see Lincoln Jones yesterday."

"Oh? How's he doing with his practice?"

"It's growing. We brought him some new business."

"Who—?" he started to ask, and then understood what I was telling him. "You and Annabel are expecting?"

"Well, just Annabel actually."

"Doc, that's great news. Wait till I tell Vera! When's she due?"

"Late July, near as we can tell."

"Maybe by then the war will be over. The invasion's getting closer."

I shook my head. "I hate to think of all the boys who'll die over there. But what can I do for you, Sheriff?"

"You've got a patient named Julius Finesaw?"

I gave a silent groan. "I suppose you could call him my patient. I set his broken leg a few weeks ago when his tractor rolled over. But the man needs more help than I can give him. He needs a psychiatrist."

"Don't have any of them in Northmont," the sheriff pointed out.

"I know."

"So you think he's crazy?"

I shrugged. "Deranged, certainly."

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. What's he done now?"

"Says he's going to kill Ralph Cedric for selling him that defective tractor. His wife Millie was so upset she called me out to talk to him."

"Did you convince him to behave himself?"

"Far from it. Says we can't stop him, that he can make himself invisible and walk down the road to Cedric's place."

"He's not likely to do it with a broken leg, invisible or not." I glanced at the day's schedule. "Tell you what—I've got a house call this afternoon out at the McGregor farm. One of their kids is in bed with chicken pox. On my way back I'll stop at Finesaw's place. I should check on that cast anyway, make sure there's no swelling."

"Maybe you can talk some sense into him, Doc."

The McGregor lad was coming along fine as the chicken pox ran its course. When I'd finished with him I cut across to Chestnut Hill Road. The old Buick was still running pretty well, and I hoped it would last till the war ended. I pulled into the driveway at the Finesaw farm, once more admiring the main house, even though it was an old place dating from the last century and badly in need of

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a paint job. As I left my car I saw Millie Finesaw come to the door. She was a petite blonde a bit younger than I was who had never seemed the right match for the tall, brooding Julius. Their son had fled home as soon as possible, joining the army when he turned eighteen. He was somewhere in Italy at that time.

"Hello, Millie. I was over at the McGregors and thought I'd stop by to see how Julius's leg is coming along."

"I'm concerned about him, Dr. Hawthorne. He's been acting even crazier than usual. I had Sheriff Lens come out and talk to him yesterday." I followed her into a living room cluttered with tables and bookshelves lined with plants and china figurines. "I've been giving him the painkillers you prescribed and they make him dopey at night, but during the day he just rants and raves."

"I'll see if I can do anything for him."

She led the way up the creaking staircase to the second floor. He'd stayed up there to be near the bathroom, though I was glad to see he was seated in an armchair by the window, his immobilized leg supported by a footstool. A bare right foot stuck out from the bottom of his cast. The room was sparsely furnished, with not even a bookshelf in sight. A Sears catalogue on one table seemed to be his only reading matter.

"How are you feeling, Julius?" I asked, opening my black bag.

"I'll feel a lot better after I've killed that bastard Cedric. He sold me a tractor damn near killed me, and now he says it was my own fault."

"You two have been feuding for as long as I can remember. Isn't it time you called a truce?"

"When he's dead."

"And when will that be?" I asked to humor him.

"Tomorrow midnight."

"You can't do that, Julius. You've got your right leg in a cast."

"That won't stop me."

"Do I have to get a sheriff's deputy to park outside your house all night?"

He gave a sly, twisted smile. "Wouldn't matter. I can be invisible."

I sighed. "Julius, you need to see someone who can help you. I'm just a general practitioner."

"Don't believe me, do you?" He held up his right hand, showing me a gold ring with a gem of some sort in it. "This is a genuine shepherd's ring, described in Book Two of Plato's *Republic.* It was found by Gyges, a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia. If I turn it so the stone is inside my hand, I become invisible."

"I'd like to see that," I told him, playing along.

"Not now. Tomorrow midnight, when I kill Ralph Cedric."

"Where'd you get the ring? Something like that must be valuable."

"It was a gift," was all he'd say.

"Julius, suppose I bring Ralph Cedric over here in the morning,

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so the two of you can straighten this out like civilized people."

"Bring him here and I'll kill him. Save me having to walk over there." He emphasized his words by lifting a gnarled walking stick leaning against his bed.

I glanced at Millie and saw that she was beyond dealing with him, her face frozen into a helpless mask. I dropped the subject and went about examining his cast and leg. "You're coming along pretty well," I told him. "Another few weeks and the cast can come off."

He raised his eyes to mine, and in that instant I had no doubt that he was mentally ill. If it was physically possible, he would indeed walk down that road tomorrow midnight and kill Ralph Cedric. "See my ring, Doc? Pretty, isn't it? Going to make me invisible."

I stopped by the sheriff's office on my way back, giving my opinion. "The man's deranged, Sheriff. He may not be capable of making himself invisible, but he's certainly capable of bashing Cedric's head in if he gets close enough."

Sheriff Lens grunted. "Doesn't really need to get close, does he? Every farmer on Chestnut Hill Road owns a hunting rifle. How far is it—about a hundred yards or so?—between the houses. He could sit in his bedroom window and pick off Ralph Cedric when he comes out the door."

"His window's on the other side," I pointed out.

"He could crawl to the other side of the house, or limp over with his walking stick and rifle."

"You can't arrest a man for making crazy threats, Sheriff, especially not if he's crazy to start with."

"I'll have a deputy check the area tonight, in case he decides to go a day early."

I nodded. "And I'll find some excuse to call on Cedric and his wife tomorrow. Whatever happens, Julius Finesaw isn't going to become invisible and kill anyone."

The following morning was exceedingly mild for the eighth of December and I was beginning to wonder if we'd have a white Christmas. I parked in front of Ralph Cedric's house and rang the bell. His wife June came to the door and greeted me with a smile. She was a tall, attractive woman in her thirties, with only a few gray hairs showing among the waves of brown.

"Dr. Hawthorne! What brings you to our doorstep? Are you giving free samples today?"

"Afraid not, June. I'm helping your neighbor Finesaw with an insurance claim for his busted leg. I was thinking Ralph could give me some information about that tractor."

June bristled a bit. "It wasn't the tractor caused that accident! Any sane person knows you don't run a tractor along the side of a hill that steep. The man is crazy."

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"Is Ralph around? I see his car's in the driveway."

Ralph Cedric appeared from the kitchen holding a cup of coffee. He was a stocky bald man somewhat older than his wife. He'd been running Cedric Tractor Sales for the past ten years and doing pretty well until the war made new farm equipment almost as hard to come by as new cars. Still, farming was necessary to the war effort and he was in business on a limited scale, even though his main supplier was now building tanks. "You want me, Doc?"

"Just what happened with that tractor and Finesaw's broken leg? I set it for him at the time but he was next to incoherent about how it happened. He seemed to blame the tractor you sold him."

Cedric leaned against a bookcase, sipping his coffee. "I can't imagine how Millie stays married to him. That man's impossible. The tractor wasn't new, but it was the best I could get second-hand. I warned him that he should stay on relatively flat fields with it. He hadn't had it a week when he tried to plow the side of a hill. It's a wonder his leg was the only thing got broken."

June interrupted then, taking up the battle. "He told Millie he was going to kill Ralph as soon as he could get over here. Said he could make himself invisible. Isn't that enough to get him committed?"

"He hasn't done anything yet," I pointed out. "But I've asked Sheriff Lens to keep an eye on the place."

"What's this coming up the front walk?" Cedric asked, glancing out the window. "Is that Millie carrying a snowman?"

It was indeed. Millie Finesaw was bearing down on us with a three-foot-tall snowman made of giant cotton balls with a carrot nose and coal for eyes, a corn-cob pipe and a little top hat. June greeted her at the door. "Millie—what have you done?"

"I made this as a peace offering. There's no snow yet, but you can have a cotton snowman in your yard, or even in your living room if you want."

June took it from her and invited her in. "This had to be a lot of work, Millie." She placed it on the floor near the fireplace.

"It was nothing. I love fiddling around with things like this. Takes my mind off—" She stopped short, with a pained expression we could all read.

It was my job to ask the question, so I did. "How is Julius today?"

"All right, sleeping mostly. I think those pain pills really numb the brain. He just hasn't been himself lately."

I nodded. "It's best he sleep as much as possible. I have to be getting along now. I'll let you people visit."

Somehow Millie's visit seemed to relieve the tension all around. I left them with a good feeling that, shepherd's ring or not, her husband was not about to transmogrify into an invisible murderer at midnight.

Annabel and I had dinner that night at our favorite restaurant,

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Max's Steakhouse, so we could tell him our good news. We'd held our wedding reception there and Max Fortesque was like one of the family. "That's great news!" he told us, ordering a bottle of wine for our table. "It means one more customer."

"Not for a few years," Annabel told him with a smile.

Sheriff Lens came in then, perhaps hoping to find me there, and joined us at our table. "Vera and I are delighted about the baby," he told her at once. "I guess I'm too old to be godfather but we'll love it like our own. Vera's already planning to knit some bootees."

"Thanks, Sheriff."

We invited him to join us and he agreed to a glass of wine. Annabel was careful to take only a few sips for herself. I told him about Millie's gift of a homemade snowman for the Cedrics and he agreed it sounded as if things were under control. "But I think I'll manage to be out on Chestnut Hill Road around midnight, just in case."

"That's good," Annabel agreed, "because Sam will be home in bed." She said it with a smile, but I knew she meant it. She was never happy when I went chasing off after dark.

Although I usually tried to be in bed by eleven, I found excuses that night to stay up later, near the telephone, even as my wife was calling to me from upstairs. "I'll be up in a few minutes," I told her, knowing that Sheriff Lens would radio in to his office if anything happened.

I was about to call it quits and go to bed when the phone rang. It was one of Lens's deputies. The sheriff had called for assistance at Ralph Cedric's home, and he wanted me there, too. I quickly explained the situation to my unhappy wife and slipped into a coat as I hurried to the car. On the deserted midnight roads it took me only ten minutes to reach Chestnut Hill Road and the flashing lights of three sheriff's cars.

Sheriff Lens was waiting for me out front. Even in the dim light from the house windows I could see he was distraught. "Sheriff—"

"It was Finesaw," he told me. "I was watching the street all the time. He never crossed it, yet the next instant he was there by the front of the house. He smashed the door glass with his walking stick and unlocked the door. As soon as he was inside June ran out screaming and wailing. My God, Sam—"

I followed him into the house. The destruction seemed to be everywhere. Even the cotton snowman had been trampled and pulled apart, a lamp broken, books pulled from their shelves, clothes scattered. Ralph Cedric lay in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor, his skull battered by Finesaw's gnarled walking stick, which lay at his side.

"Is he still here?" I asked.

The sheriff shook his head. "We've searched every inch of the house. I've got a couple of men watching Finesaw's place but we haven't gone in yet."

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I could hear sobbing from the dining room. "What about June?"

"She's in bad shape, Doc. Maybe you could give her something."

I went into the next room, where a deputy was trying to comfort her. "Is there any family we could call?" he was asking, but she only shook her head.

"Give me a few minutes alone with her," I told the deputy, then sat down at the table. "Tell me about it, June. How did it happen?"

"He—he smashed in the door with his cane. Then he just started breaking everything."

"It was Julius Finesaw?"

She nodded. "He had a hooded jacket on but I knew him. He walked stiffly because of the cast on his leg. Ralph came running out of the kitchen. I told him to go back, but Finesaw was already on him with that cane. I ran to the door and started screaming. The sheriff came running but by that time it was too late. Ralph was dead."

"And Finesaw?"

"He was just . . . gone."

I turned back to Sheriff Lens. "What did you see?"

"Like I said. All of a sudden he was on the front walk, heading for the door. When he smashed the glass I jumped out and ran toward the house. If I'd been parked a little closer I might have gotten here in time to save Ralph's life."

"We'd better see about Finesaw," I said grimly. "And Millie."

I think we were both a bit fearful of what we would find at the Finesaw house, but after a couple of rings of the doorbell Millie appeared in her robe and slippers. "What is it?" she asked. "What's happened?"

"Is Julius here?" Sheriff Lens asked, delaying an answer to her question.

"Why . . . I think he's sleeping. I gave him another pain pill."

She led the way up to his room, and I noticed the sheriff surreptitiously slip the gun from his holster, holding it out of sight against his leg. She opened the door to her husband's room and turned on the light. He was lying there in bed, his cast-bound leg up on pillows, and his eyes opened at once. When he saw me he smiled and said, "I've done it just as I promised. I've killed Ralph Cedric."

Impossible as it seemed, there was evidence to bear out his words. The gnarled walking stick that had leaned against his bed on my previous visit was now the blood-stained murder weapon in Ralph Cedric's kitchen. The slippers next to the bed showed traces of dirt on their bottoms, and a hooded jacket lay on the floor nearby.

"Let me take your pulse," I said, gripping his right wrist. It was racing a bit, though I couldn't attribute that to any recent physical activity. The sight of us invading his bedroom in the middle of the night might have accounted for it.

"You weren't sleeping with him?" the sheriff asked Millie.

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"Not since the accident. With the cast and all I knew he'd be more comfortable with the entire bed. I've been using the extra room." She took a deep breath. "Tell me what happened to Ralph Cedric."

"He's dead, Millie. June and I both saw a figure that looked like Julius entering their house."

I was more interested in hearing what Finesaw had to say. "Tell us how you did it," I urged.

His smile was sly as a tiger's, a mixture of pure evil and insanity. "Millie was in her room. When it got near midnight I got out of bed with my cane, put on my slippers and jacket, and made myself invisible."

"Show us that," I suggested, as I had the previous day.

"No, no! I can't overuse the power."

"How did you kill Cedric?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"When I reached his door I became visible again. I wanted him to see who was killing him. I smashed the glass and opened the door, then swung my stick around at things. June was screaming. I felt sorry for her. Then Cedric appeared and I clubbed him with my stick."

"You left it there," I said. "How did you get back without it?"

The sly smile again. "I don't need the stick when I'm invisible. My body has no weight and I can float."

"If you admit to killing him, I'm going to have to arrest you," the sheriff said.

"Of course. I don't expect you'll be able to hold an invisible man in prison very long, though."

"We'll see to that," I said. Before he knew what was happening I gripped his wrist and pulled the shepherd's ring from his finger.

"No!" he screamed, but it was already off.

"Now you're just a human like the rest of us." I handed the ring to Sheriff Lens. "Keep this in a safe place."

Finesaw was thrashing in the bed. "Millie!" he shouted. "They've taken the ring!"

She stood in the doorway shaking her head, close to tears. "We'll have to take him away," the sheriff told her. "I'm sorry."

He called for an ambulance and stretcher, and when Finesaw tried to resist I had to sedate him. There was no doubt that the man was mentally incompetent, but that still didn't explain—in a rational world—how he'd killed Ralph Cedric.

Finesaw was hospitalized under guard, and a grand jury quickly indicted him for murder. In his testimony Sheriff Lens admitted he might not have seen the man approaching the house because the light was poor. "What else could I say, Doc?" he told me later. "They'd never buy an invisible man. Finesaw admits to the killing and has even described how he did it. Except for the invisibility part it makes perfect sense."

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"Except for the invisibility part. Don't you see, Sheriff, that's the most important element."

"There are no streetlights on Chestnut Hill Road. Maybe I didn't see Finesaw until he was in the light from Cedric's house."

I shook my head. "Even without the invisibility I doubt Finesaw could have hobbled over a hundred yards with his cane. He certainly couldn't have gotten back to his bed without the cane."

"What other possibility is there?" he asked.

"Cedric's wife."

"June? That couldn't be. She ran out screaming before I even reached the house. There was no time for her to have done it. Besides, if she killed her husband how could Julius know exactly what happened?"

"You're right," I admitted, but I still didn't like it.

The case dragged on through the Christmas holidays and into January. The war news was mainly about the Russian advances, recapturing much of the land Hitler's legions had overrun the previous year. With the war and Annabel's pregnancy always in my thoughts, I had little time for Julius Finesaw's situation.

That was why the phone call from Millie in mid January came as a surprise.

"Dr. Hawthorne? This is Millie Finesaw. I've engaged a lawyer from Shinn Corners to defend my husband and he needs to speak to you. I was wondering if you could meet with us one day this week."

I glanced at my appointment calendar. "I have some free time tomorrow afternoon, around two. How would that be?"

"Fine. At your office?"

"I'll be expecting you."

They arrived right on time, Millie wearing a fur jacket against the winter winds and Terrance Mellnap dressed in a ski parka and boots. He shook hands and gave me his card. "We've got more snow in Shinn Corners than you have," he said, perhaps as an excuse for his foul-weather gear. Then he added, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Hawthorne. I've heard a great deal about you over the years."

"All good, I hope."

"Certainly." He opened his briefcase. "There's a preliminary hearing next week. Naturally we'll be pleading not guilty by reason of insanity."

"Of course." I glanced over at Millie.

"Since he was never examined by a psychiatrist, we'd like your testimony as to his mental condition. That should persuade the judge to order a mental examination."

"I can testify as to what I know. Tell me, Millie, what is his present condition?"

"He's depressed. He keeps telling me he wants his ring back."

I shook my head. "That's not going to happen. It's part of his obsession."

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"What harm would it do?" Mellnap asked. "Surely you don't believe this invisibility business."

"Of course not, but my point is that he still does. Give him the ring and he might think he's invisible and try to escape when they're bringing him to court."

The attorney nodded in agreement. "You have a point there."

The following Monday I testified at the preliminary hearing and the judge ordered a psychiatric examination for the defendant. I doubted if the case would ever come to trial with the shape Finesaw was in. After the court session I had lunch with Sheriff Lens at the counter in the drugstore across from the courthouse.

"How's Annabel doing?" he asked.

"Fine. She's seeing Lincoln Jones for her regular checkup next week."

"July will be here before you know it."

"I hope so."

"What's the matter, Doc?"

I shook my head. "It's this Finesaw case. Nothing about it satisfies me."

"What do you mean?"

"Since Finesaw couldn't have become invisible there has to be some other explanation. You might have missed him hobbling down the street in the dark, but he still had no way to get back. The person who killed Ralph Cedric must have gone out the back door of the house and run through the field in the dark."

"But in his confession Finesaw described the crime in detail. If he didn't do it, how did he know about it?"

"Exactly, Sheriff. And there's only one explanation for that. It was Millie who crossed that road in the hooded jacket, Millie who killed Cedric and escaped through the back door to tell her husband exactly what she'd done."

It was a good idea but Sheriff Lens shot it down at once. "Couldn't be, Doc. For one thing, Millie is a full head shorter than her husband. I could never mistake her for him, not even in dim light. And I had a deputy there within minutes, watching Finesaw's house to catch him returning. He was shining a spotlight around the place and saw nothing."

I thought about that but I didn't like it. "It couldn't have been Julius unless he really was invisible. It couldn't have been June Cedric because there was no time for her to do it, and she couldn't have told Julius what she did. It couldn't have been Millie because she's too short and would have been seen returning to her house. Where does that leave us?"

The sheriff shrugged. "A passing hobo, looking for a house to rob?"

"You forget the murder weapon was Julius Finesaw's walking stick, which I saw in his house just a day earlier."

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"Then it has to be Finesaw, Doc. However he did it, he's got to be guilty. What difference does it make? He belongs in a mental hospital anyway, and that's where he'll go."

I felt as if the spirit had drained out of me. "And for the first time since coming to Northmont I've got a mystery I can't explain."

It nagged at me, in the office and at home with Annabel. "You've got to get it off your mind, Sam," she told me a few days later. "Think about becoming a father."

She was right, of course, but the following morning I decided on one more visit to the sheriff's office. "What's up, Doc?" he asked, imitating a popular movie cartoon character.

"Please, Sheriff."

"Just joking a bit. What can I do for you?"

"Do you still have Julius Finesaw's ring, the one that makes him invisible?"

"Sure do. If the case goes to trial, the district attorney might need it, but for now it's still in my file."

He slid it from an envelope onto his desk and I studied it carefully. "It doesn't look particularly ancient or valuable."

"It's not. They sell ones like it at Ross Jewelers for nineteen ninety-five. I checked."

"And yet something convinced him it was like the shepherd's ring of Gyges, described in Book Two of Plato's—" I froze in mid sentence.

"What is it, Doc?"

"That's it, Sheriff! That's the answer! Come on, I'll explain on the way."

We took the sheriff's car and as he drove I talked. "Where would a man like Julius Finesaw, a farmer with mental problems, who didn't know enough to keep a tractor off a steep hillside, come across a book like Plato's *Republic?* Certainly not in his house, where the bookshelves were filled with plants and china figurines, and the only reading matter in his bedroom was a Sears catalogue."

"What are you saying, Doc?"

"The books were down the road in the other house, Ralph Cedric's house. Remember how some of them were pulled from their shelves during the killing?"

We turned onto Chestnut Hill Road. "Is that where we're going now?"

"No. We'll stop first at the Finesaw house."

It was a lucky choice. Millie and June were having morning coffee together. "What is it?" Millie asked, meeting us at the door with a cup of coffee in her hand.

"There's been a new development," I said.

"Join us. I'll get two more cups."

"What is it?" June Cedric asked. "Bad news?"

"In a way. I want to tell you both a story. It's about two women,

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neighbors, who desperately wanted to get rid of their husbands."

The coffee cup slipped from Millie's hand. "Oh my God!"

"Don't say anything," June warned her.

"She doesn't have to," I told them. "I'll do the talking. The idea probably came to you when Julius broke his leg in the tractor accident and threatened to kill Ralph for selling him a defective machine. Over coffee one morning you must have decided that would be the perfect solution to your problems—if Julius killed Ralph and ended up in a mental hospital. Julius's mental condition was already so bad that you thought he could be goaded into making good on his threat. It must have been you, June, who remembered reading about the shepherd's ring and its powers of invisibility. You even found a ring that Millie could use to convince him of its power."

"How could I ever convince him of that?" Millie asked.

"He was taking painkillers for his leg and they left him muddled. Added to his existing mental problems, it wasn't hard to convince him he was invisible when he turned the ring a certain way. The killing was set for that certain midnight, only when the time neared it became clear Julius might have been mentally willing to commit murder but wasn't physically able. You switched to plan two. While Julius stayed in bed with an extra dose of mind-numbing painkillers, June did the job for him and bludgeoned her husband to death."

"Wait a second, Doc," the sheriff interrupted. "You're forgetting he was killed with Finesaw's walking stick. How did it get over there?"

"We witnessed its arrival, Sheriff, in that cotton-ball snowman Millie made. It was about the same height as the walking stick, which must have served as the anchor for those big balls of cotton. That was why the snowman had to be ripped apart, and why the other damage was done, to make it less obvious."

"You're saying it was June that I saw entering her own house?"

"It had to be, Sheriff. Millie was too short to pass for her husband, but June was taller. She wore the hooded jacket, a duplicate of Julius's own coat, wrapped a piece of white paper around her leg to pass for a cast, and limped along on the cane. She'd gone out the back door of the house and walked around the far side to the front, which was why the figure seemed to appear out of nowhere in front of the house."

But the sheriff had another objection. "I thought we ruled that out earlier, Doc. She wouldn't have had time to kill him, bust up the place, and appear in the doorway almost instantly."

"She killed him first, Sheriff. She did it all first. When she approached her front door and smashed the glass, he was already dead on the kitchen floor. She only had to toss the jacket and paper into the mess, drop the cane near his body, and return screaming to the front door."

"What was Millie doing all this time?"

"Talking to Julius in his crazy drugged state, telling him exactly

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what he'd done, how he'd become invisible, crossed the street, broken the glass, and killed Cedric with his walking stick. She even dirtied the bottoms of his slippers to add to the story. Ralph Cedric was dead and Julius Finesaw admitted to killing him. You had witnessed part of it yourself, Sheriff. It had to be true, only when they changed their plan June and Millie here neglected to work out a way in which Julius could have returned home. It left the invisibility part in place without any alternative."

They were both held on suspicion of murder, and it only took a day before Millie cracked and confirmed everything I'd said. It was sometime later that Sheriff Lens said to me, "You know, Doc, maybe the ring could have made him invisible. Did you ever consider that?"

"We live in a rational world, but there are times when even I must consider the irrational. Remember when I checked the pulse on Finesaw's right wrist? I twisted the ring so the stone was inside. It didn't make him invisible." ●

THE JURY BOX cont. from p.41

series of books; and at least three plot developments (though not the murderer) will be foreseen by experienced mystery readers. The first-person narration, mostly by Brandy, is very funny and the whole book enormously entertaining. (Allan is a collaboration of Barbara Collins and Max Allan Collins.)

** Deborah Morgan: *The Majolica Murders,* Berkley, $6.99. Also interested in the old and valuable is former FBI agent turned antiques picker Jeff Talbot, whose agoraphobic wife Sheila has a going business selling them on eBay. Some good character touches, Seattle background, and antiques lore compensate for a slow start and a far-fetched plot.

** Stephen Frey: *The Protégé,* Ballantine, $24.95. Christian Gillette, financial wheeler-dealer, returns for his second adventure. If you don't mind flat prose and dialogue, an unlikable hero, and an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink plot with a foreseeable "surprise" twist, this one has enough narrative drive to be a passable time killer.

Mark Campbell's compact critical/bibliographic reference *The Pocket Essential Agatha Christie* (Pocket Essentials/Trafalgar, $8.95) has been updated (it covers the Poirot TV series with David Suchet through 2004's *The Hollow* and the first four adaptations with Geraldine McEwan as Miss Marple), adds an index, and offers larger type than the edition first distributed in the U.S. in 2002.

Speaking of Christie, her short stories get a superb reading from Hugh Fraser, TV's Captain Hastings, in two collections from Audio Partners: *The Labours of Hercules* ($29.95 cassettes, $31.95 CDs), about Poirot's self-imposed final twelve cases (though he didn't stick to that decision), and *The Listerdale Mystery* ($29.95 cassettes or CDs), including some of the author's best non-series shorts. Fraser's readings of several Christie novels are available from the same publisher. ●

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LOST LUGGAGE

by Mick Herron

Her name was Jane Carpenter, she worked at an estate agent's, and she'd been taken at 7:26 that morning as she cut across the playing field behind the secondary school to reach her bus stop on the other side. She was twenty-three. She had wavy brown hair with fresh blond highlights. Maybe she would, but probably she wouldn't, go to Malta with her sister this summer; she had hopes her boyfriend Brendan would suggest they go somewhere together instead. These and other details still fizzed through her subconsciousness, but mostly what she was now was a machine for not dying: an unwilled continuation of heart, lung, and nervous system that pumped away, undeterred by the narcotics in her system, the ropes binding her ankles and wrists, the gag, the blindfold, the car boot's lock.

Her name was Jane Carpenter, but she was currently luggage. And if nobody found her soon, she'd be lost.

Mick Herron grew up in Newcastle and attended Oxford University. He continues to live in Oxford, where his series of "literary" private eye novels are set. The first book in the series, *Down Cemetery Road*, is not yet available in the U.S., but the second and third, *The Last Voice You Hear* (10/04) and *Why We Die* (8/06), have been published by Carroll & Graf. †

The car was parked midmorning at a motorway service station. The restaurant there was brightly lit, and its furnishings fixed in place, so the symmetry didn't spoil. Laminated menus offered pictures of the food on offer, and the sound system regurgitated an inoffensive medley to match. A man in jeans and scuffed black leather jacket left the counter carrying a tray with the mixed-grill option and a large mug of tea. He hadn't shaved for a while, nor shampooed, by the look of it. He took a seat near the corner, facing out towards the car park. There weren't many people in the restaurant, and he wasn't sitting near any of them.

"What about him?"

"Whom?"

She liked it that he said "whom."

The couple talking were Peter Mason and Jennifer Holmes, and they'd been an item for somewhere approaching eight months. In

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that time they'd done most of the usual getting-to-know-you dances, and made one or two of the usual surprising discoveries about shared interests and passions. They'd spent a few weekends together, and enjoyed what they'd learned, but this was the first time they'd come away as a couple—they were heading for a party in a cottage Pete had got hold of, up in the Peak District; somewhere pretty isolated—and their mood was a little scatty. A bit off-the-leash. On the way here they'd talked about their respective weeks at work, then moved on to mildly salacious hints about what the weekend might hold, before reverting—not to get too ahead of themselves—to inconsequential stuff: movies, music, childhood friends. Now they'd stopped for coffee, which had turned into coffee and sandwiches, and Pete had been talking about people-watching; a hobbyhorse of his. It was amazing, he maintained, what you could tell about someone just by observation. Provided you looked in the right way, and picked up on the available clues.

"With a name like yours, this shouldn't be any big surprise."

"Jennifer?"

"Ha, ha. Holmes, pumpkin. As in Sherlock."

"The great detective."

"Who could deconstruct a character soon as look at him. No villain was safe. No secret undiscovered."

"Didn't he have expert knowledge, though? Couldn't he always tell, I don't know, that you had your hair cut by a one-armed barber who plied his trade on the Strand every second Tuesday? That kind of *cheating* knowledge no real person could have?"

"Well, yeah. But the theory is absolute. Observation brings knowledge."

"You reckon."

"I reckon."

"What about him?"

"Whom?"

Jennifer nodded towards the man who'd just sat down on the far side of the restaurant. Sitting side by side the way they were, both were facing him, though he was facing the window. "Him."

Jeans and scuffed black leather jacket with a faded tee underneath. Probably with logo or slogan, though it was impossible to see from here. He must have been early forties, with shaggy dark hair and a sallow complexion.

"... Well?"

It was meant as a challenge, he could tell.

They couldn't be overheard. There was no harm in this. The man was a stranger.

Peter said, "Okay. He's used to these places. Motorway service stations."

"Everyone is. We've all been places like this."

"But they're a way of life with him."

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"Evidence."

"He's not looking round. He's focused on his food, see? The surroundings mean nothing to him."

It was true: He was.

"Maybe he's hungry."

"Maybe he is."

"And it's not like the surroundings are worth paying attention to."

"I wouldn't say that. They're not tasteful or pleasant, true, but that doesn't mean they're without interest. I notice you took in what the menu had to offer. And you checked out the coasters and everything. The posters on the walls."

"Is that shallow?"

"No. I did too. I've been places like this before, but I've never been to this particular place. There's always something new. But I'm guessing there's a saturation point, and our man's reached it. Because he didn't look around when he came in. He barely glanced at the menu. It's like everything is so familiar to him, it's not worth paying attention to."

"Good," she said. "More."

Peter thought. "Okay. When he was fetching his food, he didn't have to puzzle out the system. He already knew what was going on, that you fetch your food that side and pay this side. And where the drinks are, and everything. He didn't have to go back and fetch a teacup once he'd got to the hot-water urn. He knew to pick up the cup first."

"I didn't see any of that."

"Well, I did. Trust me. And another thing. See where he's sitting?"

"What about it?"

"Perfect place. He can eat and still keep an eye on his vehicle. That's the kind of precaution you take when we're talking about livelihood."

"Ah. He travels for a living."

"I think what we've got so far is bringing us to that conclusion, yes."

"Salesman?"

"He's not really kempt enough for a salesman, is he?"

"Kempt," she thought. That was up there with "whom."

"So I don't know. Maybe a courier of some sort."

Jennifer turned and looked out into the car park. There were no delivery vans out there. One estate car had writing down the side panels—something about double-glazing—but they'd decided he wasn't a salesman.

Peter was ahead of her. "There's all kinds of couriers these days. You don't have to wear a uniform and drive a brown truck. Maybe he delivers cars."

"Cars?"

"You rent a car to drive to the airport, but for one reason or

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another you don't need it for the return journey. Maybe you're flying back somewhere else, because you got a deal on the flight or you're going to visit your mother or something." He shrugged. "Somebody has to fetch the car, take it back to its starting point."

"You know so much."

What he liked about this was the absence of any trace of sarcasm.

"It's all just speculation," he said modestly.

"Well, of course it is. But what speculation. Tell me more."

He said, "Well . . . Looks to me like he's on the skids."

"I'll go along with that."

"But he used to be prosperous. This motorway service-station life, this is something that's happened to him. It's not the way he started out."

"Evidence," she said again.

He was ready for this. "Take his jacket. It's nice, but old. You buy a jacket like that because you want to look good, you want to look cool."

"Leather jackets get cooler the more worn they are."

"Point. But you have to wash your hair for the full effect. Nobody interested in their appearance is going to leave their hair unwashed for so long that you can tell from this distance it's dirty."

"So what do we deduce from that, Sherlock?"

Peter said, "Like I said, he's on the skids. He used to be a man who wears a jacket like that, and now he's a man who's still clinging to the jacket, but can't do the rest of it anymore. . . . Watch his hand as he raises his fork to his mouth . . . There!"

"He's not wearing a wedding ring."

"Clever girl. But what else?"

"You're going to tell me there's a white band of flesh there. That he used to wear a ring but doesn't now."

Pete was shaking his head in admiration before she'd finished. "Damn, but you're good at this."

"Sure. Except I don't believe it. I can't see any such thing from here, and you can't either, can you?"

"Well, no. But what are the chances a guy who used to wear a jacket like that never had the chance to marry? And he's certainly not wearing a ring now."

"Perhaps he's gay."

"Perhaps he is. But in the absence of evidence one way or the other, let's go with the odds."

"His marriage went down the pan."

"About the same time his old job disappeared."

"And you can tell that from . . . ?"

"That's the way it so often happens, isn't it?" For a moment they shared a look brimming with confidence that this wouldn't happen to them. "One day you've got it all nailed down, but when one thing gives, everything else follows."

"The domino effect."

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"They wouldn't have given it a name if it didn't happen."

"Whoever 'they' are."

"Oh, they're a smart bunch. Your turn. What do you think his old job was?"

Jennifer watched the man for a moment or two. He didn't look their way. He glanced at the car park once, just for a second, but other than that he concentrated on his food.

She said, "I think he wore a uniform."

He said, "Evidence?" and enjoyed saying it.

"He has that air of invisibility. I mean, when you wear a uniform, you get noticed, right? Except you don't, not really. People see the uniform, but they don't see the person wearing it. So if you ask somebody to describe, say, a policeman, they'll say, well, he was a policeman. He was wearing a police uniform."

"Uh-huh."

"And the way he's sitting there now, you can tell, I don't know . . . that he doesn't expect to be noticed. And that he's used to that. It gives him a kind of freedom."

"Freedom," Peter said. "That's interesting."

"Not the open-road freedom he gets from his courier job." She flashed him a smile with this. "A different kind of freedom. The kind that lets you get away with stuff."

"Stuff."

"You know. A life spent tootling up and down motorways, there's lots of temptations out there. The kind of person who's used to being invisible could get up to mischief."

"He could pick up hitchhikers, for instance," Peter said.

"He could pick them up," Jennifer agreed. "And then . . . whatever."

"Jesus," Peter said. "I think we've just caught ourselves a serial killer."

They both laughed.

Their sandwiches were finished. They still had some way to go, and neither of them had to say it out loud for both to know they should be on their way. But as they stood, Peter said, "You know, I think I'll go have a word with him."

"You can't!"

"'Course I can. It's no big deal. I'll just verify one fact."

"Which fact? How?"

"I'll tell him we had a bet. That he used to wear a uniform. What harm can it do?"

"He might get angry."

"I've never met an angry man yet," Peter said, "that I wasn't able to run away from. You go out to the car. I'll join you in a second."

She stood by the car, waiting. Peter came out two minutes later, holding his mobile to his ear, but whatever he was doing with it he finished before he reached her. "Just checking my messages," he

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said, putting it in his pocket.

"And?"

"Nothing important."

"No, silly. The man. What did you find out?"

"Well . . ." He was drawing this out. Then he smiled. "You were right, clever girl. He used to drive a bus."

"A uniform. But completely invisible."

"Well," he said, "I don't suppose that actually makes him a serial killer."

She looked back through the restaurant window. The man was still sitting there, but he was watching them now, the look on his face completely unreadable from this distance. Or maybe it would have been unreadable even close up. He had the air of being one of those people it wasn't possible to know much about, no matter how good you were at observation. She shivered a little, then got in the car.

"Cold?"

"No, I'm okay."

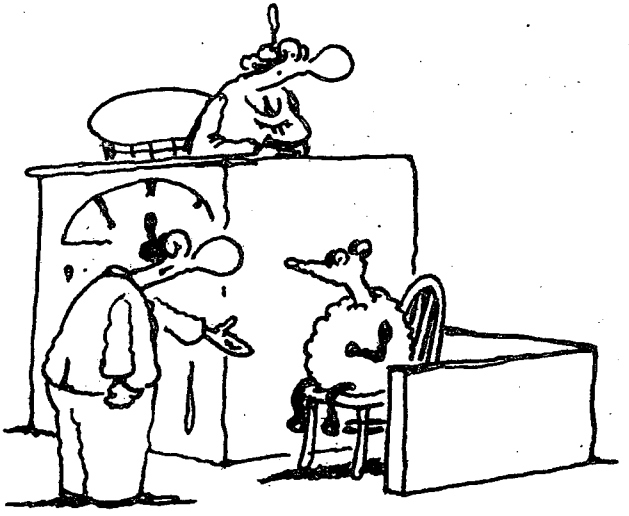
"Good."

"A little excited, to tell you the truth."

Turning the ignition, Peter smiled at her. "Good," he said again. Then they drove off.

Their names were Peter Mason and Jennifer Holmes, and in the eight months they'd been together, they'd made one or two surprising discoveries about shared interests and passions. And now they were heading for a cottage Pete had got hold of, up in the Peak District; somewhere pretty isolated, for a private little party. Just the two of them, plus their luggage.

Everything they needed was in the boot. ❁



"You say it wasn't stalking, but by your own admission, everywhere that Mary went you were sure to follow!"

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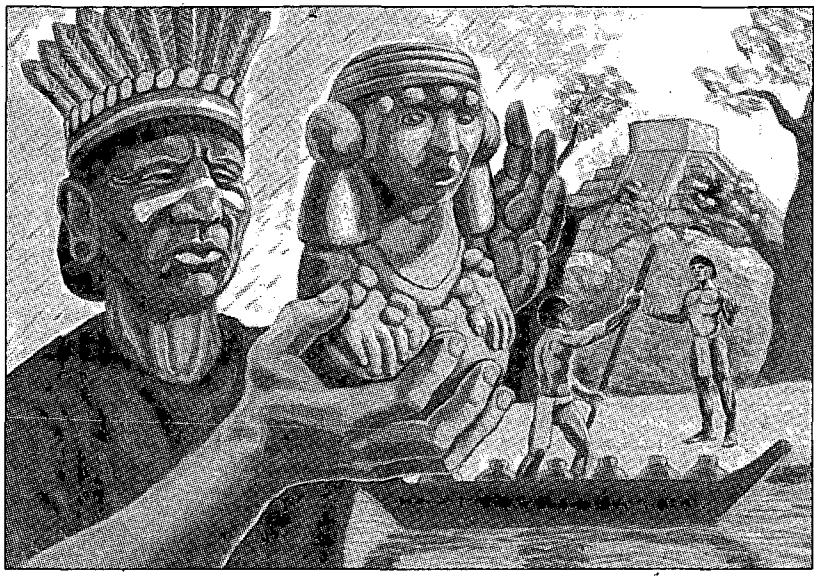

Art by Luis Perez

JADE SKIRT

by Simon Levack

My mistress was concerned about her water supply.

This may seem an odd preoccupation for an Aztec. After all, our city, Mexico, was built on an island in a freshwater lake and was riddled with canals, one of which ran past my mistress's house. However, you had only to think of all the rubbish and other things that were tipped into them by the city's thousands of households to know why the water we drank always came from springs. Some of these were within the city itself, but the city had long since outgrown them, and now the most important source was on the hill of Chapultepec, across the water on the western shore of the lake.

Years ago—before I was born—the rulers of Mexico had built a great aqueduct whose two stone channels linked Chapultepec to the city. Most households got their fresh water from men who filled their jars from the aqueduct near the point where it entered the city and carried them by canoe through the city's network of canals direct to our doors. They were paid in bags of cocoa beans and most Aztecs scarcely reckoned the cost, being happy to be spared the daily chore of fetching their own water. Merchants, however, took worldly wealth more seriously than most of us. My mistress, Tiger Lily—the lady to whom I was bound technically as a slave, although in reality

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our relationship was a good deal more complex than that—was a merchant. This all had something to do with why I was standing in one of the aqueduct's channels—the southern one, currently empty and closed for cleaning—with evil-smelling muck oozing between my toes and a fetid stench filling my nostrils.

"It's free water for two years, Yaotl," Lily had explained. "Just for standing around and watching a ceremony, and you can't claim you haven't done worse before. Not to mention the fact that you drink the water, too."

"I know," I admitted. "It still seems like an odd request, though. What can I tell a water seller that he can't see for himself?"

Blue Feather, whose canoe brought a full jar to Lily's house every day, had asked her for my services for a day. The newly cleaned and reopened northern channel of the aqueduct was to be rededicated to the water goddess, Lady Jade Skirt, and I was to watch the ceremony. I was to take careful note of every aspect of the proceedings, even down to precisely where the priest stood while he made his sacrifices—Blue Feather had been most particular about this.

My mistress's face, framed in a mass of dark, silver-streaked hair, wore a frown whose meaning I could catch better than anyone. She obviously thought my assignment strange, too. "Does it matter?" she asked eventually. "He can't be there because he's got to make a sacrifice at Jade Skirt's temple, but he wants to be sure every detail of the ceremony at the aqueduct is right. And you have to admit you're a better person to observe something like this than most—after all, you used to be a priest."

That much was true, although as I stood in the slime watching Jade Skirt's devotee going through the ritual, I was still puzzled. This ceremony was not much like the bloody sacrifices of men and quails I had been used to when I had served in the temples.

The goddess's priest balanced precariously at the edge of the full channel. "O Lady of the Jade Skirt!" he cawed in a harsh, deep voice. "O Goddess of the rivers and springs, accept this, our unworthy gift!" And so saying, he tossed the object in his hands into the water at his feet. It made a soft *plop* and vanished from sight.

The goddess had received many gifts that morning, each of them accompanied by the same self-abasing formula. Some had been humble enough—tortillas, ears of maize, drinking vessels, a ladle full of burning incense—but the priest had saved the best till last, and the

A solicitor, Simon Levack worked for the Bar Council in the U.K. before his first novel, *Demon of the Air*, won the CWA Debut Dagger Award in 2000. Since then he has produced two more novels in the series. All, including the most recent, *City of Spies*, are published by Simon & Schuster, and feature the hero of this story.

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offering he had just made had been splendid: a small gold statuette of the goddess with glittering emeralds for eyes. It had been paid for by the water sellers. A small crowd of them stood around, some with the priest on the edge of the water channel, others looking up from the empty conduit next to it. Their canoes jammed the canal running beneath us under the aqueduct. Others, including Blue Feather, were at the goddess's temple, where more offerings would be made.

It was the southern channel's turn in the regular maintenance schedule, which is why it was empty of water. I stood in it among the rest of the water sellers and the other spectators, waiting silently for the ceremony to end and fervently wishing I were somewhere else. A fine drizzle had begun to fall. It plastered the priest's long, already lank hair to his pitch-stained temples and made his black cloak hang limply around him, and made me feel more miserable than ever.

"It always seems like a terrible waste to me," someone nearby remarked.

"A waste of time, certainly," I muttered. Then I peered around at the speaker. He had a plain, undyed cloak and the tonsured hair of a man who had never captured an enemy warrior in battle: the lowliest of commoners. I wondered whether he was one of the water sellers, but when he caught my eye he told me otherwise.

"I know what you mean." He spoke quietly, for fear of upsetting our neighbours, although they were all huddled and shivering in their cloaks and probably longing to be elsewhere, too. "But we have to do it, don't we? My parish provided the work detail that cleaned out that half of the aqueduct, you see, so we have to be here."

"Cleaning these channels must be a nasty job," I remarked sympathetically. One of the quirks of slavery among Aztecs was that it freed a man from many of the onerous duties that ordinary commoners were subject to, such as taking part in public works whenever the emperor or his officials demanded it. The only person I had to obey was my mistress. So I had no first-hand knowledge of the kind of labour that cleaning the aqueduct or shoring up the sides of a canal or whitewashing a palace might involve.

"Oh, it's all right, unless you have a problem with filth, stink, and a back that feels like you'll never be able to straighten it again." The other man grinned. "Of course, with this particular job we always live in hopes—if you see what I mean. Never comes to anything, mind you. Like I said, it's a terrible waste."

I frowned. "I don't follow."

"Stuff like that gold statue," he explained patiently. "And all the other jewels and things that get thrown in the water as offerings to the goddess. You'd think, wouldn't you, that some of that would come up when we're scooping all the muck out of the bottom? Never happens, though." He sighed regretfully. "A man could live for years on just one find like that, but I suppose the goddess can't spare it! All we ever get is the rubbish. She doesn't seem so inter-

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ested in the clay bowls and tobacco tubes. Funny, that, isn't it?"

Eventually, the priest gabbled his way to the end of the ritual. It concluded with a sacrifice of his own blood, drawn from his earlobe with an obsidian razor and sprinkled on the water's surface.

By the time I had returned home, Blue Feather was already there, passing the time of day in Lily's courtyard and clearly itching to be told exactly what I had seen. He was all polite attention as I gave my account, but he might as well have been asleep, since he immediately asked me to repeat it.

After he had left, Lily and I agreed that we still could not understand what he was about. Still, as Lily pointed out, that was up to him, provided she still got her water.

She was less sanguine the next morning, when she found out that her water seller had vanished. And naturally it became my job to find him.

"I was looking for him in the marketplace," she explained, "to get our agreement witnessed. But he wasn't at his usual place by the canal, and no one could tell me where he was. Go and see if he's ill or something."

This was the start of a frustrating morning. Lily told me where he lived, and that part was easy enough. It was a typical Aztec house, two rooms opening onto a small square of courtyard, fronting a canal just broad enough for a two-man canoe.

I had to skirt a small mound of trash piled against one side of the house. It looked like the usual rubbish—ash from the hearth, broken shells of turkey eggs, maize husks, and so on—and I would normally not have spared it a glance, but I was surprised to see a hollow cane, the sort used as a smoking tube. This puzzled me because tobacco was expensive, imported from the hot lowlands for priests and lords; I could not understand what it would be doing in a humble water seller's house.

The water seller's wife was home: a weary-looking woman, fine-boned and grey-haired, whose patched and frayed blouse and skirt made the idea of her husband taking his ease with a pipe even more incongruous.

She received me politely, inviting me to squat in her courtyard and offering me food, as good manners required. It was a piece of a slightly stale tortilla which I had no hesitation in declining.

She had little to tell me. "He went out last night and didn't come back."

I waited for her to add something to that, but the silence merely dragged on. Eventually I said: "He didn't say why?"

"No."

"Was he in the habit of going out at night?" Few Aztecs were. The night was widely feared: It was ruled by spirits, creatures out of dreams, and fateful beasts such as owls and weasels whose

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appearance could foretell a man's death. Only those trained to overcome such things, such as priests and sorcerers, usually went out after dark, unless there was some very good reason.

"No, he wasn't. That's why I'm worried." The woman did not sound especially worried to me. In fact, she was downright curt, considering I was trying to find her missing husband. It was almost as if she resented my questions.

"Is there anyone else at home?" I asked. "Anyone who might know where he went?"

She hesitated for a long time, her eyes on her lap. I suspected she was trying to think of a reason not to answer me, but at last she said: "My son. I don't think he'll help you, though. He's probably down by the aqueduct, filling his jars."

Blue Feather's son was called Cloud Eagle. He was a tall, burly young man of about twenty, his muscles developed by years of hauling heavy jars about. I found him at one of the water sellers' favourite places for filling up, close to where the previous day's ceremony had taken place. Cloud Eagle was in a canoe on a broad waterway at the point where it ran beneath the aqueduct's twin channels. He was standing upright and trying to keep his craft steady using a long wooden pole jammed into the canal's bottom, while an older man poured water down towards him using a large clay jug. Unfortunately the boat kept moving, and while some of the water went where it was supposed to, tumbling into open jars with a hollow rattle, much of it ended up in the bottom of the boat, over the younger man's head, or in the canal.

"Hold that thing still, can't you?" cried the man on the edge of the aqueduct.

"I'm doing my best!" his colleague protested. He was sweating, his muscles straining with the effort of keeping the canoe where it was supposed to be. He was clearly not accustomed to this particular task and from where I stood, it looked as though he was making a mess of it.

"Cloud Eagle?" I called out from the bank.

"Yes," snapped the youngster. "What do you want?"

"Sorry to distract you, but . . ."

The man on the aqueduct threw his jug down in disgust: It dropped straight into the canal, missing the canoe by a hand's breadth. The young man in the boat sat down heavily.

"Sorry," I said again, "but it's about your father . . ."

With a sigh he got up and took up his pole again, using it to push the boat towards me. "All right. I'm coming. Don't think I can help you, though."

From above my head a voice snarled: "Keep it short. We've still got a living to make!"

Cloud Eagle did not get out of the boat. He was taller than I, so

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although the bank was raised a little above the water's surface, we were almost eye-to-eye.

"My cousin lent me this boat," he explained, indicating with a glance over his shoulder that his cousin was the elder man still glowering down at us. "He said he'd help me until Father comes back . . . or at least until we find his canoe."

I felt my eyebrows lift. "Your father took his boat with him?" That was curious. His wife had not mentioned this. It was odd enough for a man to wander off by night for no apparent reason, but where could he possibly want to go that would mean he needed his canoe? It suggested he had not merely felt the urge to go behind the wicker screen hiding the nearest public latrine, and maybe fallen in a canal on the way. He had had some purpose in mind, one that meant travelling farther than he could easily walk.

"Yes, he seems to have done. I hope the boat comes back. . . . I mean, I hope he comes back, of course, but there's no way we could afford to replace the canoe. In the meantime, Flint Knife up there has let us use his, and he agreed to help me fill the jars, just for today." The lad grimaced. "I should have suggested we do it the other way around. I'm usually the one scooping water out of the aqueduct and pouring it out, while Father holds the boat steady. I hadn't realised his part of the job was so difficult!"

I looked at the jars surrounding him in the boat. None was more than half full. "I expect you're right and you can't help, but have you any idea at all where your father might have gone? Or if he was, well, up to anything—well, you know what I mean . . ."

"I know," said the young man sadly. "Anything he wouldn't want my mother to know about, you mean? No, I don't think so. If there was anything like that he didn't share the secret with me."

I sighed. I was going to have to go back to Lily with nothing to report, but I could think of nothing more to ask. "All right. If he does appear let him know that Tiger Lily wants to see him, won't you?"

As I turned away, and Cloud Eagle picked up his pole again, a thought struck me. "How are you going to carry on now that jug's gone in the water?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, that happens all the time." He laughed. "I'll just dive down and get it again. We've lost it in deeper water than this before! It's only waist-high here, that's one of the reasons we use this spot."

Lily was, as I had anticipated, not particularly pleased at my failure, and the prospect of her two years' free deliveries vanished somewhere beyond the city limits, but she was even less pleased the next morning.

"I don't believe it!" The words, uttered in her shrillest voice, echoed around the courtyard of her house. "Both of them gone now?"

The bearer of the news was none other than Flint Knife: Cloud Eagle's cousin.

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"That man owes me a good deal," Lily was saying, "and if you're telling me his son's gone missing as well . . ."

"What happened?" I asked Flint Knife. "And why are you here?"

The man was almost as angry as Lily. His face was a peculiar purple colour. "How should I know what happened? All I know is, when I went to fetch my boat this morning, it wasn't there. I thought my cousin might have borrowed it so I went to his house. But his mother told me he'd vanished in the night—just like his father before him! I came here because I knew you'd been looking for Blue Feather and you spoke to his son yesterday—I thought you might have some idea where he's gone." The man breathed heavily, and added: "I need that boat, you understand? It's all very well helping out a relative in trouble, but I have to have it back, or else how am I supposed to live?"

The pitiful note in his voice did not impress Lily. "I don't understand what made you think we could help. I've got enough troubles of my own—what?"

Her last word was snarled at me, because I had just cleared my throat. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe we can help, after all." I turned to the water seller. "Just one question, though. When you spoke to Blue Feather's wife this morning, did she seem upset at all?"

He stared at me incredulously. "What, a woman who's just had both her husband and her son vanish into thin air?" He paused, frowning. "Actually, now you mention it, she didn't seem all that concerned. She didn't look as if she'd been up all night crying, anyway."

"What are you thinking, Yaotl?" my mistress demanded.

I glanced up at the sky. It was cloudy, but I sensed that the Sun had not yet climbed very high. "It may not be too late," I muttered to myself. "If he waited until dawn . . . And he would, he might not find the place in the dark . . ." I looked at my mistress. "We'll have to go now, though," I said. "In fact, if we can run, so much the better!"

I was to regret my suggestion four hundred times over before we had come to the water seller's house. As a former priest I had been trained to endure pain and exhaustion by the endless round of fasts, ritual self-mortifications, and vigils that our rites demanded, but that had been years before. By the time we reached our objective my lungs felt as though they had been seared by hot smoke and my legs were twitching and threatening to double up under me. Flint Knife looked and sounded worse than I was. Lily, who had kept pace with us with her skirts gathered about her knees, seemed, surprisingly, a little better, although in truth for the last part of the journey we had all more or less slowed to a brisk walk. All the same, as soon as the little house hove into sight I realised we had got there in time.

We all paused for a moment, panting. It was Cloud Eagle's cousin who was the first to utter words, staggering two further, exhausting steps towards the canoe moored by the house. "That's . . . my . . . boat!" he gasped incredulously.

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"Yes," I muttered, starting forward myself. "And there's your cousin, and look what he's holding under his arm! Stop!"

The young man wasted only a moment staring at me and my exhausted and desperate-looking companions. Then he leapt straight into the canoe, the object still cradled under his arm, and seized a paddle with his free hand. At the same time his mother appeared from the house, screeched once, and ran along the bank towards us.

Cloud Eagle managed one-handed to get the boat to move. It did not get very far. Flint Knife let out an angry howl and jumped into the waist-deep water in front of it, waving his arms wildly. The canal was too narrow for the vessel to pass, and Cloud Eagle could not get enough speed up to run his cousin down. He bellowed in frustration, lashing the water with his paddle. Then he raised it to strike at Flint Knife, which was when I drew level with the canoe, jumped in, and wrested the trophy from the crook of his arm.

At the same time Lily raced past me to confront Cloud Eagle's mother. Recalling the words they used to each other still makes me blush. It took Cloud Eagle's despairing voice to call an end to the brawl. "It's all right, Mother," he moaned, tossing the paddle into the canal. "It's no good. They're on to us. They've got it now."

There was barely room for all of us to squat or kneel in the courtyard of Blue Feather's house. The water seller's wife—widow, I reminded myself—did not offer us anything to eat. She stood in the corner and glared at us.

I set the thing I had taken from her son on the hard earth in front of me. The goddess Jade Skirt's emerald eyes gleamed into mine, sparkling as if with mirth. Well, I thought, nobody ever claimed the gods had no sense of humour.

"Well, now I've got my boat back, I'll be off," Flint Knife said.

"Not so fast!" snapped Lily. "I still want to know what happened, and where's Blue Feather?" When no one else answered she turned to me. "Yaotl?"

"In the lake, near where the aqueduct enters the city, I should think." I looked at his son. "But I don't think he'll be coming back from there, will he?"

The lad said nothing.

"You'd better explain," Lily said.

"It's easy enough. You remember how the water seller wanted me to describe the ceremony at the aqueduct in detail—even down to things like exactly where the priest was standing when he threw the idol in the water? He claimed it was because he wanted to make sure it was all done right, but of course that was nonsense. Why should it matter to him? He's just an ordinary trader, and not a very successful one at that, judging by the state of this place." The grey-haired woman hissed reproachfully. "Which reminds me—I noticed tobacco tubes in the trash heap outside,

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and couldn't think what they were doing in such a poor household.

"I didn't work out what was happening when the old man vanished, but when we heard his son had disappeared, too, it was suddenly obvious. They were after this statue—or at least the gold and jewels in it. This is what I think happened: Both Blue Feather and Cloud Eagle went out the other night, in Blue Feather's canoe. They knew where the statue was, thanks to my description. However, they were a bit wary of just going straight to the place to fish it out, because it was inside the city and someone might see what they were up to. So instead, they took their boat to the point near the shore of the island where the aqueduct first enters the city. Cloud Eagle here climbed up to the aqueduct and made his way along it. I'm not sure how deep it is when it's full, but I suppose he used one of those tobacco tubes to breathe through.

"He would have had to grope around under the water for a while, but he obviously found what he was looking for. Then he made his way back and threw the statue down to his father in the boat."

A groan from the young man told me I'd got it right. "That's where it went wrong, isn't it?" I said. "Because Blue Feather didn't catch it—and being solid gold, it went through the bottom of the boat, straight into the lake. And by the time Cloud Eagle here realised what had happened, the boat and his father had both vanished."

Lily gasped. Even Flint Knife muttered something under his breath that may have been an expression of shock. Cloud Eagle looked at the ground. Only his mother was impassive.

"And that's it, really. The young man had to go home and tell his mother what had happened. She knew about the plot all along, of course—she could hardly fail to, with both of them out overnight—and they agreed that he should go back the next night and try to retrieve the statue from where it had sunk. He's a good diver—unlike his father, alas! Blue Feather and the boat will still be there, of course." Even if Cloud Eagle could have retrieved the body, I knew he would not: The drowned were sacred to the Rain God and only priests could touch them. "They must be in the lake—someone would have noticed them in a canal."

There was a long silence, which Lily eventually broke. "So, I'm not going to get my free water." She sounded philosophical enough about it. "What do we do with these, though?" she asked, indicating our unwilling hosts.

Aztecs rarely went out at night, except with good reason; but Lily and I had a good reason. Besides, I had been a priest, and knew how to fight any demons we might encounter. And we had the gods on our side, I thought, as I extended a hand to help my mistress up to the edge of the aqueduct; one of the gods, at least.

"Amazing, the risks some people will take," I mused, as I gazed for the last time into Lady Jade Skirt's glittering green eyes.

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"What, us perching here, you mean?"

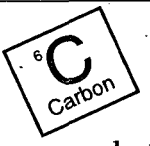
"No, I mean fooling around with the gods, the way that water seller was prepared to do, and for what? For something he could sell in the marketplace."

We had not reported Cloud Eagle and his mother to the authorities. Losing Blue Feather and the boat had seemed punishment enough.

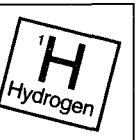
I smiled and, after a brief glance at my mistress, tossed the gold statue back into the water, where it belonged.

I watched it sink with a twinge of fear. What if it were looted a second time? What about all the other precious things that were tossed into the water and, as the workman had told me, never seen again? What if, in the end, the goddess never got anything but the kind of rubbish the labourers found when they dredged the aqueduct?

If that were the case, I thought, then we had better get used to drinking lake water, after all. ●

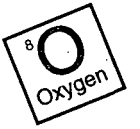


C Seven H Fourteen O Two
— or —
The Apothecary's Lament



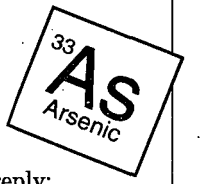
by Prof. Theophilus Amadeus Gotlieb Zeus

So . . .
You say you'll adore me the whole of my life.
C seven H fourteen O two!
You state we are fated to be man and wife.
C seven H fourteen O two!
You claim that no other could possibly be
Who'd worship my being to such a degree
And I should regard you reciprocally.
C seven H fourteen O two!



The authorities somehow have failed to connect
The many unfortunate lives you have wrecked.
Yes, As_2 O_3 I'd likely expect
Were I sharing quarters with you
(I'm referring, of course, to the arsenic powder
I'd no doubt encounter in my evening chowder).

Yet . . . .
You tell me it's kismet. You claim it is Fate.
C seven H fourteen O two!
And Destiny sent me as your future mate.
C seven H fourteen O two!
As you prattle on thusly I ponder each lie;
Now, "Balderdash!" seems much too harsh a reply;
I find it more soothing to say with a sigh:
C seven H fourteen O two!
(That's "oil of banana" to you:
C_7 H_{14} O_2.)



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CHARLADY'S CHOICE

by Neil Schofield

In the five years since we first published Mr. Schofield's work, —when he was a newcomer to the field, with only a few published stories—he's gone on to become one of the best and most prolific writers of the short mystery. In his latest tale he has some fun at the expense of "big-name" writers and the publishing business. ¶

Thus Mrs. Ethel Hoskins and her great friend Mrs. Vera Bumstead, friends of forty years, widows both, cleaning ladies both, in the snug bar of the Ring O' Bells in Camden Town: Ethel was a small port and lemon, Vera was a Gin and It, because the vermouth helped her digestion, she said. Both had the thin, tired faces of women who had been through it a bit, but who believed firmly that you mustn't grumble, worse things happen at sea, look on the bright side, it could be worse. Both wore clothes suited to their calling of charlady: worn dresses that had seen better days, pinafores with multiple pockets for holding dusters and other ephemera and impedimenta, and flat, comfortable shoes. It was a treat for both of them to slip off their shoes under the table and sip their drinks while waiting for their buses. Vera took the 13 up to Chalk Farm, while Ethel caught the 29 to Holloway. The Ring O' Bells was their way station and their Wailing Wall.

"Writers," said Ethel, taking a vicious sip from her port and lemon, "I wouldn't give them house room." Ethel was a stocky, aggressive woman with a pronounced chin and blazing blue eyes. Vera was smaller and fainter, like a bad photocopy of herself.

"Playing you up, then, is he, your bloke?" said Vera with sympathy. She knew as well as anyone just how a customer could play you up.

"Missis Hoskins, I wender," said Ethel, her voice modulating into an excruciating parody, "I wender if it wed be too much to ask you to hoover more thoroughly under the tables in mai steddy?"

"Steddy, is it?" said Vera.

"Steddy, my arse," said Ethel, "pardon my French, Vera, but I speak as I find. More like a rubbish dump. Paper everywhere. Piles of it. Never saw so much paper in your life. Mr. bloody Jolyon Carstairs. You believe that? Jolyon. What sort of a name is that? Mind you, I had a Jasper once. What's happened to the good old

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names? Wilf. Arnold. Walter."

"Bert," said Vera, invoking the name of Ethel's defunct husband, who had been as stocky and aggressive as Ethel.

"Ah yes. Bert," said Ethel, a nostalgic look in her eyes. "But *Jolyon*. Writers," she said again, plunging her nose into her glass, "I can't be doing with them. If I'd known it was going to be a writer, I'd 'ave told the bloody agency to stick their job up their jacksy."

She was talking about the Golden Mop Agency in Camden Town who supplied cleaning services to that gilded little neighbourhood adjoining Regent's Park and Primrose Hill, peopled in large part by writers, artists, actors, and other bohemians. If you lived in NW1 and you needed a duster wafted round your bibelots of a morning or an afternoon, Golden Mop was your man. Or your woman, as was more popularly the case.

Vera nodded.

"I wouldn't mind," said Ethel, "but it's that click, click, click all the time on their computers. Drives you round the bend."

Vera said, "Well, you won't have that with Mr. bloody Mervyn Fincham while I'm in Margate. He won't have a computer. Uses a real old-fashioned typewriter. Clack, clack, clack, *he* goes."

"Won't have a computer?"

"Won't even have a phone."

Ethel considered this outlandish concept for a moment. She said, "What is he, then? Barmy?"

"No, 'e's not barmy. Not *dangerously* barmy anyway. He's just a bit wossername—eccentric. That's it, eccentric."

"Well, he'd better not come near me with his eccentric," said Ethel.

"Oh, he won't come near you. He doesn't like people. He doesn't talk to anyone, no one comes to the flat."

"Hermit sort of affair, is he then?"

"A bit like that. But don't worry. You won't have any trouble with him. I've told him you're taking over for me for two weeks and it's all right with him. You won't even know he's around the place. He goes out for a walk in the morning. He's like clockwork. Two hours he's out. The rest of the time, he's clacking away like the clappers. He doesn't like to talk. He leaves notes all the time. 'Please polish the floor in the front hall.' 'Do not answer the door on any account.' Stuff like that. In this really rotten spiky writing. Terrible. I've never seen handwriting like it. Worse than a doctor's, it is."

But Ethel was only half listening, brooding into her drink.

"I always wanted to try that writing lark," she said musingly. "I mean, can't be that hard, can it? I mean, I've read loads of stuff, Agatha Christie, that Mary Higgins Clark and that P. D. James. Jack Frost is good, too. Doesn't seem to me it'd be too difficult."

Vera had the look that said Ethel was reaching above her station.

"You got to know stuff," she said warningly.

"I know stuff, Vera," said Ethel scornfully. "I seen things you

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wouldn't believe, I have. Be nice having people reading your books, have a nice house, going on *Woman's Hour,* being interviewed and that. Have three names. I like writers with three names. There's lots. Mary Higgins Clark. That Barbara Taylor Bradford. That Joyce Carol Wossername. Three names adds something."

"Authority," suggested Vera.

"Maybe," conceded Ethel. "What I'm saying is it can't be hard. I've read some of my bloke's stuff, he leaves it lying about all the time. Mr. Jolyon Carstairs. Tripe, it is. Complete and utter tripe. I could do better than that with me eyes closed, wearing boxing gloves. And here's me with my legs under the doctor, doing the charring for 'im. Does that seem right to you? It doesn't to me."

"But you have to have the typing," said Vera.

"Oh, I got the typing. Piece of piss that is, excuse my French, Vera. My Norma taught me all that. Gave me lessons. Type away like a good'un, I can. Computers and everything. Only on a computer it's not called typing. Word Pro-cessing, it's called," she added kindly and carefully.

"Word pro-cessing. Well, there's a thing," said Vera, impressed.

"All I'm saying is, it can't be hard, if your bloke can do it and my bloke can do it. I've a good mind to have a go at it, you just see if I don't. I can't go on like this with my legs. I deserve a bit of luxury, I do, after all these years." Her chin jutted out aggressively. Vera was slightly taken aback. She had never heard her friend speak so bitterly and assertively about anything save the price of port. She tried to shift the subject onto more neutral ground.

She said, "You're sure you can manage both of them?"

"Don't you worry your head," said Ethel. "I'll do your Mervyn Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Then I'll go have a nice bit of lunch in the caff in Camden High Street. And I'll do Mr. bloody Jolyon Carstairs in the afternoons Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, Saturdays is when I do his windows, see. No problem. You go off and have a lovely time with your Sandra. Get yourself a drop o' sunshine. You can do the same for me when I go see my Norma in Clacton."

"I'll send you a postcard, Ethel," said Vera, "nice postcard from Margate. That'll cheer you up."

And they finished their drinks, Ethel and Vera, very pleased with themselves and their arrangement.

Very nearly the first thing Ethel did, on her first day *chez* Mr. Mervyn Fincham in his ground-floor garden flat, was to go through his desk. She had every opportunity to do so, since Mr. Mervyn Fincham, after letting her in, went off to take his constitutional stroll in Regent's Park, only a step away.

So Ethel had all the time in the world to put his study to the sack. Well, "study." It was really just an alcove in the large living room. His desk was a large old roll-top affair, with many drawers

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and a venerable Remington typewriter in the place of honour. There were lots of papers, cuttings and sheaves of pages clipped together. A quick shufti through this lot and a heap of correspondence told Ethel that Mr. Mervyn Fincham earned a precarious living writing short stories, occasional articles, and book reviews. She found copies of a couple of American mystery magazines, brightly coloured things with brutal men with guns on their covers. Flicking through them, she found stories under Mervyn Fincham's name. She didn't bother to read them. "Gentleman's Relish," one was called; "And Little Lambs Eat Ivy" was the other. Stuffed in the desk's pigeonholes were letters and contracts from editors, and other assorted correspondence. Vera had been right about the typewriter and she was right about the telephone, too, Ethel discovered. How could someone live without a telephone? Then she tried the desk drawers and found them to be locked. That was not a problem. The late Bert, who in addition to his many other qualities was an accomplished thief, had, very early on in their marriage, initiated her into the Mysteries of the Lock. Because, as he told her, another skill is always useful in life, and besides, You Never Know.

She took two of the hair grips with which she was always well endowed, and following the delicate instruction she had received, tackled the top right-hand drawer, which opened to her with a grateful little sigh. There were folders inside.

Ha. First, a thick, packed brown folder, with a title in thick black felt pen. *"Double Space,"* it said. Underneath there were other folders, which seemed to be notes, untyped, written in Mr. Mervyn Fincham's spiky handwriting, and appeared to be the outlines of other novels that he had in his head but were as yet unwritten. There must have been ten or twelve of these folders, each with ten pages of tightly written notes, swatches of dialogue, character descriptions. There was enough in these folders to keep Mr. Mervyn Fincham busy for years, Ethel thought. To keep *anyone* busy for years. Mr. Mervyn Fincham was a book writer on the quiet.

She looked at the clock and settled down to read *Double Space.* It was a crime novel whose principal characters were, curiously enough, two writers of crime fiction who clearly, even in the first chapter, didn't get on. Things were obviously shaping up for a scrap.

She read contentedly for an hour and a half, and then had to stop and hoover and give the place a flick of a duster. When Mr. Mervyn Fincham came back, the place was clean and smelling slightly of Pledge. Ethel had noticed that if you sprayed a little furniture polish into the air around the front door, people didn't bother checking too much.

Fincham said, "Very good, Mrs. Hoskins." He was a tall, lanky man with a beaky nose and an untidy shock of black hair. He had a furtive look, Ethel noticed, a hunched-shouldered, guilty sort of

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stance, and a horrible way of talking out of the corner of his mouth, while avoiding her eyes. He looked like a man who was simply waiting to be found out. He looked like a man who *had* been found out and was talking to you in the prison exercise yard, where, Bert had told her, everyone talked like that. It wasn't surprising that he had no friends, looking like that. Ethel couldn't imagine anyone wanting Mervyn Fincham as a friend or even an acquaintance.

"I do my best to oblige, I'm sure, sir," she said. Hermit or no hermit, eccentric or not, his money was as good as anyone else's.

She left at twelve and walked down the road to the caff, where she had a nice piece of liver and bacon, and thought about *Double Space.* There was a sizzle of excitement running through her body. He might be a long streak of piss, she thought, but he knew how to write. It had gripped her from the start and she wasn't easy to grip. Agatha didn't grip her like that. She had only finished about a third of what Mr. Mervyn Fincham had written and she was looking forward to reading the rest on Wednesday.

And then she'd see.

But in the meantime, she had Mr. Jolyon Carstairs to sort out. Who was a very different kettle of fish. Mr. Jolyon Carstairs lived in a vast apartment, on the second floor overlooking Regent's Park. Mr. Jolyon Carstairs was not eking out an existence as a short-story writer like Mervyn Fincham. He had written books, lots of them. One whole shelf of his bookcase was filled with copies of his works. Ethel had sneaked one of them home and had read it. It was not much cop, she told herself. She couldn't make head nor tail of it. People wandered around, nothing happened, other people wandered in and more nothing happened. But in the blurb, Mr. Jolyon Carstairs was hailed as "a master of the psychological mystery story." Whatever that meant. If this was crime fiction, then Ethel was a monkey's uncle.

In crime stories, people did things, terrible things, and were either caught or they weren't. This empty stuff of Carstairs's was not up to snuff. But *Double Space,* now there was a crime story for you.

To have a good crime novel, what you needed apparently was a good plot. The rest, well, that came along on its own. Mr. Mervyn Fincham appeared to have good plots coming out of his ears.

Well, he wasn't the only one, she decided as she began Mr. Jolyon Carstairs's housework the next afternoon. The trouble with Carstairs, she had decided long ago, was Carstairs. He was a pompous man who affected a small goatee and usually wore velvet jackets and bow ties. He had very little hair and eyes that looked as though they had been painted on. As Ethel watched him tittupping around the flat after her, his feet clicking on the parquet, she always had the urge to put out a foot and squash him.

It was a relief as always to leave his flat. Her last long-established duty was to prepare a large pot of Mr. Carstairs's nightly

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infusion of hawthorn and verbena, which was apparently good for warding off all manner of ills, and which, according to him, Mr. Carstairs liked to sip, lukewarm, in the evenings. Ethel had taken a little trial sip once and once was enough. It tasted like something you would spray on tomatoes. He was welcome to it. Perhaps it was to help him sleep. She had noticed, in his bathroom cabinet, lots and lots of different sleeping pills. Mr. Carstairs evidently had an overactive mind which wouldn't leave him alone at night. Interesting.

The next day was Wednesday, so she went bright and early to Mervyn Fincham's to spray furniture polish into the air and read the rest of *Double Space.* She had been right. It was good. Mervyn had almost finished it; she could see where he was going with the plot, or at least she thought she could, and she could think of a twist or two that she would put in if she were him.

"If I was 'im," she said to herself as she vacuumed cursorily round the steddy, "I'd make the first bloke the second bloke's brother. That's funnier. And, into the bargain, I'd give the copper a stammer. That's different and that's funny, too. And 'e doesn't know nothing about how to pick a lock, neither."

Well now. All you need is a good plot. But for a good plot you have to set it up. If you want to get on *Woman's Hour,* that is.

The next day, Thursday—and she was keeping count because Vera was due back now in ten days or thereabouts—was her day for Jolyon Carstairs.

On this day, Jolyon Carstairs went into his study and was surprised to find in the middle of his desk an African carving of heavy brownstone which he had brought back from one of his researching trips to Benin, or Dahomey as it had been when he was there. And which normally lived with other similar artifacts in the lounge on a special low table. He picked up the sculpture, which was an idealised representation of a lanky mother and child. It was an ugly old thing, he had privately always thought, but you had to bring something back from Africa, didn't you, and he had always told people that it had been presented to him by a shaman and that it had curative powers. He had actually bought it with others in a street market in Porto Novo for three shillings.

"Mrs. Hoskins," he called.

Ethel appeared at the door in pinafore and turban. She was carrying a mop and was wearing pink Marigold gloves.

"Yes, sir?" she said.

Jolyon Carstairs held out the carving.

"What on earth was this doing on my desk?"

"I've no idea, I'm sure," she said. "P'raps I was dusting it and carried it to your study in an absent-minded moment. I'll put it back in the lounge, shall I?" She took it from him, handling it very carefully.

"A place for everything, Mrs. Hoskins, and everything in its place," he said.

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"To be sure, Mr. Carstairs. My mother always said as much. It was her motto."

"Was it," he said with total disinterest, and sat down at his desk and fired up his computer, not wondering why Mrs. Hoskins had gone straight back into the kitchen with the carving.

"Everything in its place," she said as she wrapped the carving carefully in newspaper and put it in her bag. "I'll give him everything in its place." Then she attacked the floor with her mop and with ferocious concentration.

Later that morning, Jolyon Carstairs looked round the living room door where Ethel was dusting the mantelpiece.

"Mrs. Hoskins," he said, rather hesitantly, though not knowing why; for heaven's sake, she was the cleaning lady.

"Yes, sir," said Ethel, turning.

"You wouldn't have any idea—that is, can you explain what has happened to a pair of shoes of mine? Brown brogues they are, in fact. And I can't seem to lay my hands on them."

"I'm sure I wouldn't know, sir. I never touch your private things, as you know. Perhaps you've mislaid them. Left them at a friend's house or something."

Jolyon Carstairs frowned.

"Left them at a friend's house? Why on earth would I do that?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, sir," said Ethel in a tone that indicated that she was very clear that some people had peculiar habits that were none of her business. "They'll turn up, I'm sure they will, Mr. Carstairs, don't you worry your head about them."

He stared at her for a moment. "No," he said, "very well. But it's very mysterious."

"Mysterious as may be," said Ethel, "but my mother always said that there were more things in heaven and earth. And she was right."

Mr. Carstairs considered the dictum offered by Ethel's mother and traipsed despondently off.

The following day, Ethel was pleased to see that Mervyn Fincham had written another ten pages of *Double Space* since her last reading.

"Good boy," she said, reading busily, "that's it. You hammer on."

The she went through the contents of the other folders in Fincham's desk.

"He's got the touch, has the boy," she told herself, "this is good stuff. Bert would have liked this one."

One of the pages in one of the folders interested her particularly. It was apparently a piece of dialogue which Fincham was trying out. It read:

"You utter bastard. It's people like you that give the human race a bad name. You are a pretentious, untalented, unprincipled little swine and my only hope is that someday someone will give you the

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thrashing that you so richly deserve."

Interesting.

On Saturday, Mr. Jolyon Carstairs began to feel he was losing his wits. He went into the lounge, where Ethel was up on a stepladder, cleaning the high windows, a task she always left for Saturdays, because Mr. Carstairs was often out on a Saturday afternoon watching cricket, or involved in other gentlemanly pursuits, and she could spread herself.

"Mrs. Hoskins," he said, cursing himself for the diffident tone Mrs. Hoskins always produced in him, "I'm sorry to trouble you, but I wonder if you have seen my light overcoat. It's beige, perhaps you know the one I mean, and I can't seem to find it anywhere."

"An overcoat, is it now?" she said, looking down at him from the stepladder. "Well, dearie me, I can't say, I'm sure. It was shoes the other day, wasn't it? And today, it's an overcoat. Well, I can't help you, sir, I'm afraid."

"Yes, and the shoes never reappeared, either," Mr. Carstairs said petulantly. "I don't know what's happening."

"Well, if you don't, then neither do I, Mr. Carstairs," Ethel said in a voice that conveyed pity and wariness, as though she was wondering whether some people were quite right in the head, which was precisely what Mr. Carstairs was beginning to wonder. He wondered what life was coming to. He wondered if he was starting premature Alzheimer's.

At five o'clock Ethel went home and prepared to rest on the seventh day, as prescribed. God had rested on the seventh day, and Ethel followed his example meticulously, if not religiously. What was good enough for God was good enough for her, she was fond of saying. We do not know if God played bingo on His seventh day, but that was what Ethel did anyway, winning four pounds and a blue washing-up bowl, very useful. She spent the four pounds on port and lemon, which she drank alone because Vera was still in Margate.

On Monday, she spent a pleasant morning at Mervyn Fincham's, getting up-to-date with *Double Space.* He'd done a lot of work over the weekend, she was pleased to see, adding at least twenty pages. And he was setting himself up for the ending, she could tell.

And so was she. But there were still a few wrinkles to iron out.

One of them ironed itself out with no help from her. On Tuesday afternoon, on arriving at Carstairs's, she was pleased to learn that Mr. Jolyon Carstairs had a meeting with his publishers, which couldn't have suited her better. As soon as he had gone, she went to her capacious bag in the kitchen and took out a sheet of paper, and took it to the study where she crumpled it and placed it in the wastepaper basket. Then, donning her pink Marigolds, she set to work on Mr. Carstairs's computer. Happily, Carstairs himself had put paper in the printer only that morning. Mr. Carstairs's

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absence gave her a clear two hours in his study, which is all she had been hoping for.

She left at six, after preparing his herbal infusion this time with extra special care.

Vera was not called to give evidence, which offended her not a little. After all, she had been the permanent cleaning lady for Mervyn Fincham, even if her friend Ethel had been her replacement during the crucial period. On her precipitous return from Margate, after reading the horrid news in the *Daily Mirror,* she offered herself up at the police station, was perfunctorily interviewed by a police inspector, and was then shown the door with no ceremony, with the promise that the authorities would be in touch if it proved necessary. It had evidently not proved necessary. It was Ethel who was the star, and Vera was merely the understudy waiting vainly in the wings for the call to come.

Still, she had a little reflected glory—after all, she was on the sidelines, even if she wasn't playing in the match—and even this tiny touch of fame earned her the right to several Gin and Its in the Ring O' Bells.

She had to admit, reluctantly, that Ethel stood up well in the witness box. Under examination and cross-examination, her jaw stood out like a rock and her eyes never flickered, and she spoke in a clear voice.

Yes, she had undertaken cleaning duties for the deceased. Yes, she had arrived as usual on the morning of Wednesday the eleventh. At about eight forty-five, sir. On entering the hall, she had heard raised angry voices coming from the apartment belonging to the deceased. What did she do then? She opened the front door of the flat. And what did she find? Nothing, sir. What did she hear? She heard the sound of hurried footsteps from the lounge. When she went to investigate, she found the French windows open, and at the end of the garden, she saw a running figure open the garden gate and disappear into the road. Then what did she do? She went to the study, where she expected to find Mr. Mervyn Fincham. And did she find him? Yes, sir, but he was sitting slumped in his chair, with blood streaming from a horrid wound. He was clearly without life? Yes, sir. Yes, the witness would like a glass of water, thank you, I'm sure, Your Lordship. And what had she done then? She had called the police, who arrived in ten minutes. Was she able to identify the person she had seen at the end of the garden? No, sir. She had only seen him for a second. Did she know of any bad feeling between the deceased and the person in the dock, Mr. Jolyon Carstairs? No, she didn't meddle in the affairs of her employers, sir, it wasn't her place to. Very commendable. And after she had been interviewed by the officer in charge of the investigation, what had she done then? She had taken her bag

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and gone round to Mr. Carstairs's apartment. But this was a Wednesday. Was not her day for Mr. Carstairs a Thursday? Yes, but she had been feeling a bit wobbly recently, so she had previously asked if she might change the day to give herself a full day free on Thursday to relax. And when she arrived at Mr. Carstairs's apartment, what was his comportment? Comportment? Behaviour. How did he behave? Objection: Calling for an opinion on the part of the witness. The witness might answer. He behaved peculiarly, he appeared a bit doolally. Doolally? You mean not in command of himself. That's right, sir. Did he appear to you as a man might if he had recently committed a serious crime? The jury were to disregard that scandalously disgraceful question.

A snarling cross-examination full of inference and nuance if not outright accusation failed to shake any of the witness's evidence, or to produce anything new. The witness left the box with the warm commendations of the judge on her courage and forthright testimony.

Vera and Ethel went for a restorative drink in a pub opposite the court.

"Well," said Vera, "that was a performance and no mistake. You didn't half give 'em what for."

Ethel wiped her forehead. "I will not hide from you, Vera," she said, "that it was a real ordeal."

"Well, you did really well. Do you have to go back again?"

"I don't think so. Don't know as I shall. Makes me go all peculiar, all that. Brings back some awful memories."

However, Ethel did consent to go back, at the invitation of the prosecution three days later to hear the judge's summing up, which was a masterpiece of impartiality.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he said, "this has been a difficult and painful case for you to listen to. You have heard the evidence; it now falls to you to deliberate and pronounce on the guilt or otherwise of the accused man. You will disregard the behaviour of the prisoner, whose violent outpourings early in this hearing did little to advance his cause, indeed served only to reinforce the prosecution's case that here is a violent and calculating individual eminently capable of committing a heinous and calculated crime.

"You may of course choose to believe the accused when he avers that he is the victim of diabolical machinations and that he is entirely innocent. That is entirely a matter for you. But you will, in coming to your decision, recall the facts as presented in the admirably marshalled testimony of Chief Inspector Wickersley. The search of the effects of the deceased man—who was a writer of short fiction, and who was apparently in the throes of what I believe is called 'writer's block,' an affliction that I am told is common in the writing fraternity—revealed, in the correspondence on the deceased's desk, a letter from the accused, on his letterhead,

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couched in threatening and abusive language, and, recklessly, you will think, signed by him. The most telling passage in this vicious missive, you will remember, ran:

"'*You think you're a writer, Fincham, but you're nothing but a miserable failed scribbler. You deserve everything that's coming to you. So watch out, because I am going to get you, you long streak of piss.*'

"This note led to the police interviewing the accused and conducting a search of his apartment, where they found a pair of shoes bearing traces of soil that matched exactly the soil in the deceased's garden. And which fit exactly the footprints found in the deceased man's garden. You will recall the evidence of the forensic expert to this effect. You will also recall that the police also found in the course of their search an overcoat, which, when subjected to scientific examination, revealed minute spatter traces of the victim's blood. You will remember the expert testimony in this regard as well. You will also, I am sure, have noted the fact that among the effects of the accused, in his wastepaper basket, in point of fact, was found a crumpled letter from the deceased, in his distinctive handwriting, which addressed the accused in uncomplimentary tones. A significant passage reads, you will recall, '*You are a pretentious, untalented, unprincipled little swine.*'

"The police also found, and you may have found this significant, a group of statuettes of African origin. And you will remember that Chief Inspector Wickersley explained to you that the deceased was beaten savagely with a statuette of the same material and origin, and which, in his opinion, belonged to that very group. Evidence to support this assertion came from Dr. Eriq Ebouaney, an acknowledged expert on indigenous African art. The statuette, and I am sure the significance of this did not escape you, bore the fingerprints of the accused man.

"We shall never know with any certainty the cause of the ill-feeling between these two men. The deceased cannot tell us, and as for the accused, he amply demonstrated his contempt for this court and these proceedings by retreating, as you have seen, into a mulish and obstinate silence. From this stubborn mutism I fancy you will draw your own conclusions, if conclusions to be drawn there be.

"But perhaps we may imagine that the two men, both being writers and inhabiting the same neighbourhood, may have frequented the same public tavern. And perhaps, having drink taken, which I am told is common among persons of their calling and kidney, a quarrel broke out, founded on some imagined slight. We shall never know. And whatever be the cause, it has no bearing whatsoever on your deliberations. If quarrel there were, it soon mutated, as learned counsel for the prosecution told you not altogether fancifully, into a fully fledged blood feud, conducted at first through the mails, and finally and fatally translating into

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physical assault.

"You may believe it significant that the accused can give no account of his actions or whereabouts on the fateful morning, can produce no witnesses to support his assertion that he was elsewhere. All he could find to say was that he slept until midday. You may choose to believe him, you may not. You are at liberty to believe his assertion that he had been drugged, although a medical examination, admittedly thirty-six hours after the event, revealed no trace of drugs.

"As for the accused man's railings and phantasmagoric accusations against another person, it is for you to decide whether these are the last desperate stratagems of a guilty man who seeks to direct the blame elsewhere, or the pleas of an innocent man caught in the snares of a devious and Machiavellian master criminal in the person of an honest widow, a hardworking cleaning lady from North London. *(laughter in court)* That, too, is entirely a matter for you.

"You may choose to accept the view expressed by learned counsel for the defence that all the evidence in this case is circumstantial, and that there is not a shred of witness testimony to prove that the accused committed this dreadful crime, nor that he had indeed ever met the victim, let alone set foot inside the victim's home. You will, I have no doubt, give this all the consideration that it merits, and you will, I am sure, recall the words of Thoreau, who said, 'Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.' The circumstantial evidence in this case is indeed strong, but it is for you to decide whether it was Jolyon Carstairs who indeed watered the milk.

"You will now retire to another place to consider your verdict."

There was scattered applause from the jury which was quickly suppressed by ushers.

The jury returned after seven minutes with a verdict of Guilty and a recommendation for No Clemency.

Thus Mrs. Ethel McGonagall Hoskins and her cleaning lady Vera Bumstead, in the kitchen of Mrs. Hoskins's house in the Vale of Health close to Hampstead Heath: for Mrs. Hoskins a cup of decaffeinated coffee with just a drop of milk, and for Mrs. Bumstead, a mug of Darjeeling with three sugars.

"Be sure if you would, Vera," said Ethel McGonagall Hoskins, "to sweep carefully under the furniture in my study. I find I am beginning to have a bit of the old allergicals recently, and it may be due to house dust, my doctors think."

"I will," said Vera, who was starting to have enough of all this. Doctors yet. It had been very kind of Ethel to think of her old friend and to engage her as cleaning lady following the purchase of her house funded by the publication of *Two Write!,* her first

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crime novel (Robert Hale £14.95; Berkley $24.95: "A stunning debut"—*Kirkus Reviews;* "Packed with comic criminal insights"—*PW;* "Ms. Hoskins springs fully fledged onto the crime scene with a laugh-a-minute murder mystery that combines, curiously but successfully, a crystalline literary style with some hilariously robust reportage from the lower depths. Her stammering detective is a joy"—*Sunday Times*), but enough was enough. Ethel had got well above her station.

Vera watched Ethel as she marched out of the gate and off in the direction of the Heath, where it was her habit to take a long walk in the mornings, to get the old creative juices flowing, as she had told Vera. Vera had her own thoughts about this but kept her thoughts to herself. You don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to, she had told herself more than once, but there were still things about Ethel that nagged away at her.

All right, admit that she wrote a book. After the trial both of them had been out of a job, naturally, since one of their blokes was in the nick, the other was in the hereafter. Vera had quickly found more work through the Golden Mop, but Ethel had quite simply vanished off the face of the earth for six months and had then resurfaced with a book written, an agent, a publisher, interviews on *Woman's Hour* and everything.

Nothing against Ethel, of course, more power to her, but where did she get her ideas? She'd always said she wanted to be a writer, but you don't get to be something just by wanting to. What was more, Vera knew she was working on a new book. She'd gone into the study when Ethel was working, and Ethel had, as quick as a flash, shoved away a big blue folder, which stirred some sort of muddy memory for Vera, into the top drawer almost as though she had something to hide.

Ethel normally took two hours to get her juices flowing, so Vera had plenty of time. She went into the study and looked at the desk. Quite handy, really, that one of the things she'd remembered from *Two Write!* was a minute description of how to pick a lock.

She took two hairpins from her hair and knelt down at the desk, repeating to herself the instructions that Ethel had given in *Two Write!*

She was taking great care not to scratch the lock so as not to leave traces of her incursion.

"But," she muttered to herself, manipulating the hair grips, "what's the harm in looking? I mean, even if she does find out, what's she going to do? Kill me?"

She had opened the drawer, pulled out the thick blue folder, and opened it, and was staring open-mouthed at the pages of all-too-familiar handwriting, her mind, if not racing, then at least moving along at a smart clip, when a draught riffled the pages and the shadow fell slowly across her. ●

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The Book of Truth

by Nancy Pickard

Nancy Pickard brings her series character Marie Lightfoot, a writer of true crime, to *EQMM* this month. The first of Lightfoot's three book-length cases, *The Whole Truth*, earned a nomination for the Edgar, and the subsequent novels, *Ring of Truth* and *The Truth Hurts*, were published to rave reviews. Ms. Pickard's latest novel, *The Virgin of Small Plains* (Ballantine), is a non-series book set in her home state of Kansas. ¶

"Is this really Marie Lightfoot?"

"It is." I smiled down at a copy of my new book that just happened to be in my lap when I picked up the phone. The author's photo on the back sure enough did look like me. "This is Marie."

"You answer your own phone?"

It was a friendly, incredulous, older male voice.

"I do." I was in a good mood. The book had entered the *New York Times* bestseller list at number three, up two places from my last one. Even better, I wasn't blocked on my current manuscript. Another couple of uninterrupted months and I might even make the deadline. Teasing my caller, whoever he was, I said, "I also sweep my own floors, eat my own food, and I even write my own books. Who's this?"

"Amazing. I'd have thought—oh, never mind, you don't want to hear all that. Ms. Lightfoot, my name is Luis Cannistre. I am one year away from retiring from the Bismarck, North Dakota, Police Department and there is a case I need to see solved before I leave here."

"All right," I said, meaning only, okay, I'm listening. *Bismarck.* That was a new one. For that matter, so was North Dakota. I had written about criminal cases in many different locales, including my own hometown of Bahia Beach, Florida, but I had never pursued a case as far north as he was located. Already slightly intrigued by the setting, if nothing else, I said, "What's the case?"

"Triple murder, although not all at once. Three young women. Abducted and killed over a period of three weeks, twelve years ago."

Once he got over his surprise about me, he was succinct.

"I'm guessing you have a prime suspect?" I said, knowing that

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most unsolved murders do have favorite suspects, albeit without enough evidence to prosecute them.

"Oh, we've got a suspect, all right," he said, in a wry tone.

"Where is he now?"

"He's in prison, Ms. Lightfoot. He's serving a life term for killing one of them."

"Then what's the problem? Do you think this guy was wrongly convicted, Mr. Cannistre? Or is it Detective?"

"Detective." He had given his name the Spanish pronunciation. Lou*eese* Cah*nees*tray, with a trilled *r.* As a native of south Florida, my tongue wrapped around it easily. Or maybe it was just that I had drunk enough Cuban coffee in my time that I had finally assimilated the language along with the café con leche. "No, we've got the right man," he said.

"Okay, well, if you've already got him, then what—"

"We've got *him.* We don't have *them.*"

"Them?"

"The victims." He cleared his throat and told me more. "There was enough evidence to convict him without the bodies, including blood in his car and ATM and grocery-store video of him with one of the victims after she disappeared. But twelve years later and the son of a bitch—pardon my language—still won't say where he put any of them. The families suffer, Ms. Lightfoot. All these years and all they want to do is bury their loved ones. And I can't stand to retire without knowing they can."

"I take it these were your cases."

"Yes, ma'am, they were. Still are, the way I feel about them."

"And I come into this how, Detective?"

"He's a big fan of yours."

"Who?"

"Darren Betch. The man who killed them. He is pretty much obsessed with any true-crime book, but he is a fanatic for yours."

I wasn't surprised. I'm a big hit in prison libraries. For those guys it's akin to reading trade journals. I'm like *Business Week* for serial killers. They can read about the masters of their trade. I work very hard, however, at *not* giving them ideas about how to do it better, and to make the lawmen the heroes.

"If Darren could get you to write his story it would be like getting on the cover of *Time* magazine to him. He'd think he was 'da man' of the year."

"I don't write to glorify these guys," I said, a shade defensively.

"But it does, in their minds."

I didn't say anything.

"If you saw the fan mail he gets," Cannistre said, "the proposals of marriage—"

"Yeah, well, some women are nuts."

"Imagine how much more nuts they'll be if he's the hero of one of

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your books—"

"*Not* hero," I said firmly. "Villain. Bad guy. Killer. Not hero."

"Ms. Lightfoot, I'm not trying to offend you. Hell, I love your books, myself. We've got off on the wrong track here and it's my fault. Let me back up and tell you why I'm really calling."

Again, I kept silent. He had dug a hole for himself with me.

While I waited to see if he could recover ground, I picked up half of the lobster-salad sandwich that sat on a plate on my desk, and nibbled at it. He had interrupted my lunch, which suddenly seemed like another strike against him even though I wasn't all that hungry.

"The thing is," he said, "twelve years have gone by and it's finally sinking in with Darren that he's never going anywhere. He spends most of his time reading true crime. He particularly loves your books, and he's an arrogant SOB who gets off on publicity, and I think if you wrote a book about him he might tell you where the bodies are buried."

I inhaled sharply—nearly choking myself on the bite of sandwich I had been swallowing when he said that. "You're not serious," I said when I could talk again. "You really think that's possible?"

"I think it's worth a try and I'd try anything to help these families. Wouldn't you?"

"Detective, of course I'd like to help the families, but do you know what you're asking? You're asking me to write a *book* about this guy. Do you think I just whip those out over a spare weekend? It can take me a couple of years to write one of my books, a year to research and another year to write and rewrite. Not to mention that I'm already in the middle of one. I'd like to help, I really would, but I don't think you know what you're asking."

"It's a fascinating story. It would make a great book, Ms. Lightfoot."

"Maybe, but it's not *my* book. I have my own work I'm doing."

"Maybe you wouldn't have to write anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, maybe you could just make him think you are going to."

I went silent again. I had no idea if such a thing could work, but the idea made it harder to turn him down completely.

"Like I told you," he said persuasively, "the families just want to know."

Damn the man. How could I go back to my other book when guilt was now calling my name? Grudgingly, I said, "I guess we could talk about it, at least."

"Great! Any chance you can come here?"

"You don't want much, do you?" I said, and he laughed a little.

I dumped the book off my lap and sighed. "All right, Detective Cannistre. Where? When?"

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Luis Cannistre picked me up at the Bismarck Airport five days later.

He turned out to be a tall, lanky man in his late forties. He wore a white dress shirt, bolo tie, black suit, and hiking boots. A pungent scent of cigar smoke lingered in his car, but I didn't mind: Being from so close to Miami, I'm nearly as accustomed to cigar smoke as I am to café con leche. He wore his metal-gray hair in a flattop. It had been a long time since I'd seen a grown man in a flattop, but it suited him. Me, I was dressed for business and prison: black slacks, black shirt, short black jacket. No bolo tie. Also no pockets that would need to be emptied, no underwire bra to set off the metal detectors, and no jewelry to take off.

As we drove east from the airport, he glanced over at me and said, "Most people, the first thing they say about Bismarck is that it's flat."

I smiled out the car window at the proof of that. "Hey, I'm from Florida. We invented flat."

The Missouri River was behind us. The North Dakota State Prison was ahead of us. There was nothing but flat all around us. I felt right at home, give or take a few palm trees and an ocean or two.

"We have a nineteen-story skyscraper," he said with wry braggadocio.

"And you can see it from four counties."

He laughed. "Just about." Then the smile faded and he glanced at me with a sober expression on his deeply tanned and weathered face. "I expect you've done some homework since the last time we spoke."

"Erin Belafonte," I said, staring at the highway and clicking into my memory. "Twenty-two. Jessica Burge, thirty-one. Caroline Meyers, thirty-two. Those two, Jessie and Caroline, were best friends. Nobody knows for sure if they knew Erin, but a lot of people felt sure they had at least been acquainted, because they tended to hang out at the same TGIF parties in the condo complex where Darren Betch worked maintenance. He showed up at the parties. The guys liked him. The girls thought he was hot."

"A few of the men did not like *that,*" Luis commented drily.

"I'll bet. Betch never arrived with anybody, but he sometimes left with someone. Never the same someone, apparently. The last woman who was seen going out the door with him was Erin Belafonte. That was also the last time she was seen by anybody who knew her. She was captured on videotape at an ATM machine two days later and then on a grocery-store camera that night."

I went silent, because so had Erin Belafonte, and my heart suddenly hurt for her.

"She looked terrified," I said, and then cleared my throat.

"You all right?" Cannistre asked.

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I nodded, but turned to the window so he couldn't see the tears that had come to my eyes. "I write about a lot of them. If I don't feel it, I can't write it. Just now, at that moment, that's the first time since you brought up this case to me that I felt anything about it."

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

I stared out the windshield. "I don't know, but at least it means I *can* do it."

We came within sight of a big red brick building that could only have been a nineteenth-century prison or orphanage. Clean, plain grounds. A tower above the main floors. Foreboding. Grim. I never get blasé about the first moment of seeing a prison, any prison. There is always that flash of claustrophobia, that instant of depression, before reality shoves through and reminds me I'm just a visitor. At those moments, and even when I know that certain lives, lived certain ways, could probably only end up in such places, I want to know, What were you *thinking?* How could you have been so *stupid?"*

We went through the preliminary security, got our hands stamped with ultraviolet ink, entered a code to get through gate one, went through a turnstile, presented our visitor's passes, and then went through four more iron-barred, clanging gates to get to the visiting room. This being North Dakota, the room was different in one respect from other prison visiting rooms I had seen. There were the usual vending machines and toys for children, but this one also had display cases of Native American arts and crafts made by the inmates and offered for sale. I saw some beautiful beaded jewelry.

Security was provided by an officer on a raised platform in the room and also, Cannistre told me, by two other officers in a control room where they were operating and monitoring two 360-degree cameras. The cameras' "eyes" were smoked glass balls in the ceiling and it was impossible to tell which way they were pointed at any time.

Cannistre went to stand near the officer on the raised platform.

I chose one of the twenty round oak tables in the room, one in a far corner away from the children's toys, and sat down to await the arrival of "my" inmate. Women alone and with children began to come in, along with a smattering of obvious lawyers. Then it was the inmates' turn. Their shoes sounded heavily on the gleaming white linoleum floor. Soon the room filled with the quiet murmuring of adults and with children's noises.

I had time to think about the killers I have known and to wonder how he had come to be hung in their gallery. It's . . . weird . . . talking face-to-face to people who you know have done hideous things. Sometimes it takes an act of will to remember that, because there they are sitting across from you, laughing, talking,

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crying (a few of them), drinking sodas, looking like any other human being except for the prison haircut, pallor, and clothing. No horns. No twitching tail. No bloody fangs. Sometimes they're likable. Sometimes they're pitiful. Their annoyances sound as petty as anybody else's—too much light, not enough light, too much noise, too quiet, they hate the food, they're broke, their woman done them wrong, whatever. And all the while the knowledge of what they did hangs between us like an invisible movie on an invisible screen. Sometimes I think I can hear the soundtrack. I hear faint distant screaming, the whispers of somebody dying.

My last few books had killers who were definitely short on charisma. I was overdue for a "charmer" like Ted Bundy.

It arrived in spades and then some.

He was so good-looking in such an unusual way that it was startling. Having seen earlier photos of him I could tell that prison had sapped and faded some of his appeal, but it was still impressive. He sat down, or rather . . . kind of gracefully, athletically swung himself down into the chair across the table from me . . . and grinned around the gum he was chewing.

Darren Betch was not Native American, but you'd have sworn he was.

Whatever his true heritage, it had given him a big strong physique, black hair, smooth olive skin, generous lips, and a strong nose. In North Dakota, home to large reservations, he could easily be mistaken for belonging to a tribe if he wanted to, which apparently he did. It had come as a surprise to the other people who attended the big TGIF parties when they found out that the big handsome guy with the beaded shirt and the long braid wasn't any more Indian than they were.

"Why did he do that?" I had asked the detective.

"It helped him get girls who might not otherwise have gone with him, Marie. These were nice girls. A little wild, maybe, but basically decent girls. In the end, that's what killed them. They couldn't say no to Darren, because they thought he was Indian, and they were afraid of looking prejudiced. He knew that. He used it. I told you, he is one cunning son of a bitch."

It was an ironic, appalling theory, and easy to believe when I saw him.

Even now, in the prison, he wore his long black hair in a classic, handsome Indian braid. If I hadn't known it wasn't true, I would have sworn he had braves and chiefs in his genealogy. He clasped his hands in front of him on the table and shoved forward so he was leaning toward me with his knuckles just over the halfway line between us. He was suddenly so close that I smelled the cinnamon in his gum. His khaki shirt sleeves were rolled up, showing off football-player forearms. He had eyes the color of pecan pie, soft brown and caramel with flecks of gold.

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He wasted no time.

Locking eyes with me, he said, "May I call you Marie?"

Looking right back at him, I said pleasantly and firmly, "No."

Then, immediately, I bent over to pick up my notebook and pen from the floor where I had placed them on purpose. It was a ploy to avoid shaking hands with him. I hardly ever do that at this stage with a potential book subject. I won't refuse the handshake if they make the move, but normally I can arrange the distance between us, or shift my eye contact, so that it's not going to happen. It's strange, but most of these guys seem to understand that strangers don't want to shake hands with them. There's something too . . . accepting . . . about it, as if it confers approval. I usually wait for the handshake until it can mean something else, something unambiguous like goodbye, or thanks for your time.

I was also careful not to shift my own posture, not to scoot back or stiffen when he edged so close to me, and definitely not to respond to the flirtatiousness in his beautiful eyes. It was crucial that I not allow him to control my movements by the aggressive friendliness and sensuality of his. Crucial, but not easy. I could manipulate interviews with the best of them, but he had the advantage of being both manipulative *and* a sociopath. Sort of like the difference between amateurs and pros.

"Thank you for meeting me, Mr. Betch."

He gave me a slow crooked smile. "Call me Darren."

I smiled back at him, a cool-eyed smile I keep in my repertoire and don't much like to have to use. In a relaxed tone of voice that was only possible by virtue of my other experiences with men who have killed women, I said, "I understand you're familiar with my work."

I was being even more cautious than I usually am with these guys, because the first words out of his mouth—"May I call you Marie?"—screamed control freak. This was the kind of guy who wouldn't take no for an answer and who kept after you until you got in his car, let him in your house, gave him the access that killed you. Before he even said hello to me he was taking the reins of the conversation, or trying to. It was going to be fascinating to watch him persist, which he would. Oh, he would. On the pad of paper in my lap I began making hash marks with my pen. One slash for every time he brought up my name. There was one mark on my pad already and we weren't even one minute into the interview.

"You're the best," he told me, with that smile. "I love your work."

I wondered if he thought I was going to tell him that I loved his, too.

"Thank you."

"That last one, Marie, that was shit-hot."

I put my pen on the table, picked up my pad, and started to get up.

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"Ms. Lightfoot, I meant to say." His grin turned little-boyish.

I sat back down and made a second hash mark.

"I figured it wasn't the 'shit' that bothered you," he said in a teasing tone, making verbal air quotes around the obscenity. "I mean, your books are pretty blunt with the language, so I figure you don't offend easy that way. Are you offended by your name? That's kind of sad, Marie. What's the matter with your name? Don't you like it?"

Hash mark. Three.

This was where I was supposed to get flustered. This was where I was supposed to turn red and stammer, "There's nothing the matter with my name. I like it okay." And he was supposed to smile charmingly at me and press closer to me and say, "I think it's a beautiful name. That's why I want to say it. . . ."

"I'm more interested in the names Erin, Jessica, and Caroline," I said.

He pulled back just slightly, before he could stop himself. It was just enough for both of us to know who was in control here and that so far, it wasn't him.

"Those are beautiful names," I said, and this time it was I who clasped my hands together and leaned forward on the table. "They were beautiful girls. But there are a lot of beautiful girls who get killed, unfortunately. Dime a dozen, you might say. As you can probably imagine," I continued, "I hear about a lot of murder cases. I can take my pick of them to write about, Darren."

A bit of emphasis on *his* first name.

There had been a shift. He had heard the threat: Behave yourself or I walk and you lose your only chance to get the world's premier author of true-crime books to write about you, *Darren.*

"You write about me, you'll sell a lot of books," he boasted.

"I write about anybody, I'll sell a lot of books."

A flash of anger passed across his face. I'd hit his ego. What I saw within him in that instant scared the hell out of me, and I hoped he couldn't see *that* pass across *my* face. I had to do it this way, had to push him fast, had to get a glimpse of what he could do, who he could be, before I could lower the boom.

"You want me to write about you, Darren?"

He shrugged, offended.

"You're an interesting guy," I told him, feeding him now.

For my trouble I got an unnerving glimpse of something else in him—that canny, intelligent part that Luis Cannistre had alluded to. He hadn't fallen for my flattery; he had heard it as weakness.

"There are other authors I like, too," he said, laughing at me now.

"Oh, bullshit. You know I'm the best there is. You would, if you'll pardon the expression, kill to have me write about you. I'm going to do it, but only on one condition."

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He began to smile. He knew what it was.

"I won't write the book without knowing where the bodies are."

I don't know what I thought he might say to that, but nowhere in my wildest imagination did I ever dream it would be what he did say.

"Here's the deal," he said, with a suddenly dead-serious look in his eyes. I wondered what the expression in his eyes had been the last time the women looked at him. I shivered inside. "You show me proof you're going to write it. Like, a publisher's contract, okay? And then I'll give you proof I mean it, too."

"What kind of proof?"

"I'll tell you where to find the first body."

I felt my mouth drop open a little and couldn't prevent it.

But he wasn't through shocking and surprising me.

"Finish the book, prove to me that it's going to be published, and then I'll tell you where to find the others." His slow half-smile appeared again and this time when he moved toward me I moved away. "No tricks, Marie. You publish the book, I give you the bodies, do we have a deal?"

"What's in it for you, Darren?"

He smiled again and shrugged. "I figured it out. If I can't be free, at least I can be famous."

"That cold SOB," Cannistre said furiously when I told him. I had waited to tell him until we had navigated the reverse stages of getting through security. Now we stood by his car in the wind-swept parking lot. He slammed his right fist into his left hand as if he were punching it into Betch's face. The sharp slap of skin on skin made me jump and I moved back a step from him. "Using those girls as bargaining chips!"

"As we were going to do," I pointed out.

He gave me a look.

I shivered, though the day was warm. "You're right, it's different. Sorry. It rubs off."

"I know what you mean," he conceded, and then he took a deep breath in an obvious attempt to calm himself. "What did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know who could approve something like that. I told him I'd get back to him."

"Good. We have to talk to the families. We'll use your motel room."

"I don't have a motel room," I reminded him, and then I postulated the obvious: "So I guess that means I'm staying?"

"Aren't you?"

After a second's hesitation, I nodded.

Of course I was staying. How could I not?

We were meeting in my motel room, Cannistre told me, because

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he didn't want publicity "yet."

"Yet?" I said.

"It could come in handy later. Whatever he tells you, it could jog somebody else's memory."

"Or conscience."

"That would be nice," Cannistre said in the deeply wry tone I was coming to associate with him. He had calmed down a lot since I'd first given him the news, but I could still feel the waves of anger coming off of him.

I've met many friends and families of homicide victims over the years, just as I have met the people who killed their loved ones. But I had never before met them as a group, and certainly never for such a reason.

They all arrived early and then filed through my door to find places to sit in the three chairs, or on the edges of the two beds.

"I'm Erin's mom," the first person to come through the door told me.

She wore no makeup save for a dab of lipstick, and she was allowing her hair to go naturally gray. On this warm day she had on a black cotton jumper, a white, long-sleeved blouse with a white cardigan sweater over it, and brown loafers that she wore with hose. She had the gray, hollow-eyed look of someone who has been depressed for years, and her next words gave me an even deeper understanding of why that might be.

"Her dad died the year after she went missing," Mrs. Belafonte said, so quietly that I had to lean in to hear her. She gave me a forced, reflexive smile that disappeared so fast that I might have thought I only imagined it. "There's just me now."

Erin Belafonte, Darren Betch's first victim, had been an only child.

My heart began to hurt again, in the way it does when I'm confronted with pain I can't ease.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered to her.

She nodded, gently pulled her hand away from mine, and went on into the room.

"This is Billy Sterson," Cannistre told me by way of introduction to a man in his forties. "He was Jessie's fiancé. And this is her brother Sam."

The two men were studies in contrast, and I noticed that they seemed to keep a careful distance from each other, not looking at one another, never touching. The fiancé, Billy, was a tanned, strapping forty-something dressed in black slacks and a pink golf shirt who looked as if he might have just stepped out of the local country club. The brother, Sam Burge, had a leftover hippie look, from his shaggy hair down to his tie-dyed T-shirt and blue jeans and his brown leather sandals. Like the fiancé, he was also probably only

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in his forties, though, which made him too young to be the real thing.

"My parents can't be here," he let me know.

"Typical," Detective Cannistre muttered behind me, but there wasn't a chance to turn around and ask him what he meant.

The brother explained, "They moved to Tucson. But if there's anything they should know—" He held up a cell phone.

"They know about this meeting?" I asked him.

"Oh yeah. They know as much as any of us do."

The implication was: *which isn't much, and what the hell is this about?*

The final three people to arrive, though even they got there a few minutes before six, were Caroline Meyers's parents and the lawyer they brought with them. Like Jessica Burge's fiancé, Billy Sterson, they had a healthy and prosperous appearance, all three of them. Mrs. Meyers had on what looked to me to be a St. John suit, a kind of fashion that costs a fortune, wears like steel, and looks classic for a lifetime. Large gold earrings and a gold bracelet matched the buttons; her pumps were the same rich pink color as the suit. Mr. Meyers and the lawyer were both in business suits. He had French cuffs with gold links that looked as if they might have been bought at the same place that supplied his wife's jewelry.

"Love your books," the attorney whispered to me when we shook hands at the door. "I wish I had the time to write."

Don't we all, I thought, and turned to follow them into my motel room.

As they settled into their places, I tried to get a feel for the mood of the room. I thought I detected curiosity, dread, hope, and not a little fear. The fear was understandable. People who've lost loved ones to murder are often a lot more fearful all their lives after that; there's nowhere that ever again feels quite safe to them.

Luis Cannistre dropped our bombshell fast rather than make them suffer through a preface to it. "The son of a bitch has offered to tell us where he buried one of the girls if Marie, here, writes a book about this case. He hasn't said which one he'll tell us about. He claims that as soon as she shows him proof she's going to write it, he'll direct us to a . . . grave. He says she has to finish the whole damn book before he'll tell us the rest of it."

Both women gasped at the end of the first sentence.

They all looked stunned at the end of the detective's brief announcement.

Sam Burge broke the paralysis. "How fast can you write?" He was already on his cell phone. We stared as he listened to his parents on the other end.

When he looked up at us again, I asked him, "What do they say?"

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"They think you're on a wild-goose chase—" He made an apologetic gesture—"but go ahead and do it, anyway."

"Are you *kidding?*" Billy Sterson, the man who had been engaged to marry Jessie Burge, shot to his feet. Beneath his golfer's tan his complexion darkened even more. "Are you out of your *minds?* I can't believe we'd give this guy anything he wants. Ever."

"It may lead us to Jessie's body," Luis Cannistre said with brutal frankness.

"So what?" The fiancé came back with equal brutality. "It won't bring *her* back, will it? It'll just make him famous all over again. The only thing any of us will get out of it is heartbreak."

"Heartbreak?" Her brother's tone was scathing. "Oh yeah, right, like you were so heartbroken when you married somebody else three months later! You've got a wife and three kids, and what have my parents got? Nothing! This may be their best chance to find Jessie, and you don't have any right to try to stop them." Sam Burge looked as if he could spring across the motel bedroom and assault the other man. "You can just shut up. You treated her lousy when she was alive and now you're trying to cheat us out of finding her *body?*" His voice rose in pitch and volume. "You shouldn't even be here. I don't even want to be in the same room with you. What the hell are you even doing here anyway?"

"I invited him," Cannistre interjected. "He was like family then."

"Well, he isn't like family now," Sam Burge said hotly. "And he shouldn't get any say in this."

"I agree," Mr. Meyers said, and his wife and the lawyer nodded.

The fiancé clamped his mouth shut, and stepped back. He sat back down on the edge of the dresser where he had been leaning, and folded his arms in front of his chest. He looked furious, but he also looked as if he knew he'd been put in his place, and that place didn't include a vote in these proceedings.

Over in a corner, seated in one of the chairs, Erin's mother began to cry.

"Yes," she said, as the tears rolled down her face and she struggled to find a tissue in her purse. "I vote yes. Let's do it. I don't care what happens to him or what it does for him, I just want to know where my daughter is." Her eyes, when she looked from one to the other of us, were pleading. "Please, oh please, all of you say yes."

Across the room from her, Mrs. Meyers grabbed her husband's hand.

Her husband said, "Absolutely. God, yes."

"What if he's lying?" their lawyer said. "And he doesn't give us the other two?"

"He will!" Erin's mom said tearfully, fiercely. "He has to!"

But of course, he didn't have to. There was nothing riding on it for Betch. If he reneged, what were they going to do, give him another life sentence?

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I looked at them all, people I had never met until half an hour ago, and wondered if I could possibly do what they expected of me.

That night my editor faxed a new contract, already signed by the publisher, to my agent, who looked it over to make sure it said everything they had agreed on by telephone, and then she overnighted copies of it to me. At nine the next morning I signed the copies in the presence of Darren Betch.

By eleven, men with shovels were gathered at a leaf-strewn spot in the woods north of Bismarck. The weather had turned chilly, the sky was pewter gray, the air smelled of wood fire burning somewhere. I felt the mood within and around me as one of almost unbearable suspense. Had Betch told me the truth about where she was? And if he had, was his memory good enough to guide us correctly to the place?

"Who are we going to find?" I had asked Betch that morning.

"You need to leave me some surprises," he had told me, smirking.

The body in the hidden grave was a surprise, all right.

"It's not any of our girls!" Cannistre yelled, even as he was walking up the hillside to tell me. He looked stunned, distraught. "It's somebody else. My God, how many women did that son of a bitch kill?!"

The three original families were devastated.

So was the new family . . . the family of Susan Mae Lerner, who had been twenty-three years old when she met a guy that nobody knew, in Minnesota, and who told her friends she was going out with him one night and never was seen again. It was easy to identify her. Betch had buried her purse with her.

"You lied to me."

"No, I didn't." One hour later, back in the visitors' room at the prison, with children running wild around us and other inmates talking, arguing, laughing with their wives, girlfriends, lawyers, Darren Betch had a crooked smile on his face. He didn't sound defensive; he looked amused. "I never said you'd find the Belafonte girl. I only said you'd find the first one." He paused, lengthening the moment for dramatic effect. "And you did. You really did. You found the first one."

I wanted to slap him hard enough to leave a permanent mark on his face.

"Games. No. I'm not playing with you."

"Sure you are." His smirk widened into a grin. "You're already a player. You think you can quit now? What do you think you're going to tell those families? That they'll never know where their girls are, because you're too pure to play with me?"

I was too furious to speak.

"Tell you what," he said, putting his hands behind his head and tipping his chair back on its legs as if he were relaxing on his own

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back porch. "Give me a couple of chapters, I'll give you another body, how's that?"

"How many are there, Darren?"

He smiled. "How many chapters do you have in your books . . . Marie?"

"No." I drew back, appalled, and unable to keep from showing it. "There aren't that many, are there?"

He brought the legs of his chair back down with a crack that made the whole room go silent. Behind us I heard the guard jump to his feet; I imagined a rifle leveled toward us. Darren gave a casual wave, to indicate there was nothing going on. After a tense couple of moments, I heard the guard sit back down again.

"No," Darren told me, with his infuriating little smirk, "don't worry, there aren't *that* many. Hell, you must have thirty chapters in most of your books; what do you think I am, some kind of monster?" One more time, the smirk changed into a grin. "Just bring me those first two chapters. How fast can you write?"

How fast could I write?

That was the question, all right, and now the location of all three young women's bodies depended on it, not just two of them. It was a good question. It was a terrible question. Luis Cannistre had asked me, too. I wouldn't have been surprised if the maid at the motel stopped making beds long enough to pop her head in my room and inquire.

"Nothing makes me stop writing faster than pressure," I warned Cannistre. "You've got to understand, I'm not a journalist. What I do, it only looks like journalism. I'm a storyteller, like a novelist, only what I write just happens to be true. Stories take their own time to develop, or mine do. I've taken six months to do a book, and I've taken three years."

"But what about those books that get put out so fast?" he wanted to know. "Like, there's a disaster somewhere in the world and two weeks later there's a book about it. How do they do those?"

And why can't you? was his unspoken query.

"Those are special cases, with writers who specialize in the quick and dirty."

"But he wants you."

I nearly smiled, he sounded so regretful.

"And I'm going to hire one of them."

"You are? Who's going to pay for that?"

"I am, Luis."

He didn't say anything but I saw from the way his jaw began to work that he was either gritting his teeth or feeling touched by my offer.

But I didn't want any credit for doing it. I couldn't finish my other book obligations—on which several million dollars of my publisher's

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money hung—and also research and write this one, all at the same time. I needed professional help, a hired gun of a writer. If a book actually resulted, it would pay the freight. And if it didn't, well, I already had more money than was good for me.

In Luis's car, miles before we reached the prison to confront our game-playing killer, I was already on my cell phone to my agent to get her to find me a two-week wonder. Then I called my assistant to tell her to get her rear to North Dakota.

My hired gun, Markie Lentz, wasn't any taller than me, but he had twice the energy in his compact frame. Just watching him arrive cheered me up a little, made me feel encouraged instead of overwhelmed. Maybe we *could* get this done fast so we didn't have to prolong the families' suffering any more than could be helped. Coming down the ramp, he stood out in the North Dakota crowd: a small, broad-featured man in his forties, nearly bald, walking so fast he was almost jogging, dressed in a pink golf shirt, pressed blue jeans, and red running shoes. He was talking on a cell phone when he came down to Baggage, where I waited to pick him up. He recognized me and came over, saying, "Later," into his phone and flipping it shut.

"You do great books," he told me, the first words out of his mouth. "They're a little long, but very compelling. How fast do we need to do this thing? How do you want to divvy up the load? You write some, I write some?"

"As fast as we can work," I said, and then stuck out my hand to the young man behind him whom he had not introduced. "Hi. I'm Marie."

The young man grinned and shook my hand. "Peter Nussert."

"Yadda, yadda," said his boss with a dismissive wave of one small hand. "Say, three weeks. That quick enough for you?"

I stared at him. "Really? You do books in three weeks?"

"Isn't that why I'm here?" He smiled, sharklike. "God knows, as thick as your books are, *you* could never do it."

I burst out laughing, a release of emotion that I must have really needed, so loud that a few people passing by with their luggage turned and looked at us. When I stopped, I grinned at him and said, "What's the matter? I thought you were supposed to be fast. You can't write it overnight?"

"Not with you to slow me down," he said, and grinned back at me. "Peter, why are you standing there? Get the bags."

In my rental car, with me at the wheel, hyperactive Markie Lentz in the front passenger seat and Peter Nussert behind us, I returned to one of his first questions. "I take Darren Betch, because he can't know about you, and I take the cops, lawyers, judges. I take everything about him up to the time he goes to prison. You take the victims and their families."

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"You trust me with the victims?"

I glanced over at him. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You start most of your books with a sentimental glimpse of a victim. Builds suspense. Makes us care about them before they get whacked. It's one of your hallmarks. I'm surprised you'd turn that over to anybody else."

"Don't you do that, too?" I said. "Open with the happy vacationing family just before the typhoon hits the beach?"

"You do, boss," Peter chimed in.

"Oh yeah!" He sounded pleased with himself. "That's right, I do."

"How could you forget that?" I asked, amused.

He shrugged. "My books, they're like cramming for a test. While I'm doing it I don't know anything else, but a month later . . ." He snapped his fingers. ". . . Gone. Anyway, who cares? Our last books are so yesterday. This book! Facts. Load me up. Tell me everything you know."

I told him.

"You're not taking any notes," I said at one point.

"Short-term photographic memory," he boasted.

"Ah," I said. "That explains it."

"Also, I'm a genius."

"Also, I'm taking notes," Peter said from in back.

"All right, genius." I pulled into a parking spot and turned off the engine. "I have six rooms for our little group. One each for you, Peter, me, my assistant. Plus a double suite for our campaign headquarters. Questions?"

"Is your assistant cute?"

I gave him a look.

"Not for me!" he said scornfully, and then jerked his head toward the backseat.

"Cut it out, boss."

I smiled, thinking of my rather eccentric young assistant. "She's cute."

"All *right,*" Lentz said approvingly. "Come on, let's get to it. Hell, I could write the whole damn book from nothing but what you just told me. What do we need another nine days for anyway?" He was halfway out of the car before Peter or I had moved. I glanced over the backseat and asked his assistant, "Cocaine *and* speed?"

He laughed, this young man with a calm demeanor and a lot of intelligence in his eyes. "Oh, you haven't seen anything yet."

By that evening we had our double suite lined with sheets of white butcher paper tacked to the walls. My assistant, Deborah Dancer, had been out ever since she arrived taking photos of anything and anybody we might want to describe. From the victims' homes to Darren Betch's apartment, from the TGIF party condo to the prison and the road to the grave, Deb had snapped locales and

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the people in them with her digital camera. Then she transferred the photos to her laptop computer and from there made enlarged color prints for us to tack up. We had wall sections for each "character" in the book, with lists of their habits, jobs, education, ages, physical traits, personality traits, everything we knew about them, detailed below. We had a flow chart of Darren's process through the North Dakota legal system, along with names and titles of everybody who had prodded him along its path.

We had a chronology of the Bismarck victims:

Erin Belafonte is reported missing.

A county-wide search ensues.

Ten days later, Jessica Burge and Caroline Meyers are reported missing.

Darren Betch is arrested for the murder of Erin Belafonte; he denies it.

He is convicted, at trial, after which he confesses to all three homicides, and goes to prison.

A lot of this I would have done anyway on any of my books—only *slower,* as Markie Lentz loved to point out—but he added some idiosyncratically efficient ways of doing things that I vowed to steal and use in the research for my own books. For instance, he had Peter and Deb using different colors of Magic Marker for each person, so we could see with a mere glance at the walls where they turned up in the story.

"Did Jessie's family go to the sentencing?"

"Just her brother and fiancé—it's on the wall."

"Who made the actual arrest?"

"Cannistre."

"Are you sure about that?"

"It's on the wall, Markie."

On Day Two, he suddenly appeared at my shoulder. "Hey, Lightfoot. We got a problem at our end of the room. We're having a hell of a time trying to give these families the old sentimental twist."

"Why?"

"You know how Caroline's folks drag that lawyer around with them like he's their pet dog? Turns out they have good reason for never leaving home without him. It seems Caroline's parents have run a few financial scams in their time and now and then they've made the mistake of crossing some tough customers. I don't know if they're afraid of getting sued or if they just want a witness when they get shot."

"You're kidding."

"Right," he said sarcastically. "Like we have time for joking around."

I smiled. Markie always had time for joking around. We were all working nearly nonstop, fueled by coffee and by food that we sent the assistants into town to pick up for all of us. But that didn't

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stop him from needling me every chance he got about how slow I was. As payback, I constantly ragged on him for being sloppy.

Neither was true. I was working like a demon. He was careful, a pro.

"You said 'families,'" I reminded him.

"Yeah, Jessica's fiancé, Billy Sterson? He beat up on her a couple of times. Her brother Sam is a real winner, too. You want to know why his parents say they moved to Arizona? Because Sam's a leech of the first order. And when they don't let him squeeze them, he gets nasty about it. They moved to get away from their own son, if you can believe that." Markie cracked a cynical smile. "I think they miss their boat more than they do Sam. Aren't many lakes in Tucson, apparently."

I sighed. "Ozzie and Harriets, one and all."

"That first girl, the real first one, the one from Minnesota? Susan Lerner? Mother married five times, father's whereabouts unknown. It was all I could do to persuade her mother to send me a photo and even that is so old you can't tell what she looked like the year she died. Which leaves us with only one family sob story, which is Erin Belafonte's family. You know how her dad died the year after she went missing?"

"Yeah?"

"Suicide. His wife says it was guilt."

"Guilt?"

"For not being able to protect his only child, his baby."

"You going to start with that one, then?"

"I don't know yet. Nothing works so far."

"You'll find a way."

"Maybe I'll just make something up."

"Markie, no! Don't even say that! Even apart from the ethics of the thing, we don't know what Darren knows about them. I'm betting he knows enough to spot it if we invent lives they didn't live."

"Oh hell," Markie said, whirling around to return to his side. "You're no fun."

He wouldn't have done it. I was pretty sure he wouldn't have done it.

We finished two chapters and I delivered them into Betch's hands, praying he wasn't any kind of judge of quality. Holding my breath, I watched him leaf through the pages. When he looked up, he said, "Erin Belafonte is buried one mile to the east of the first one you found."

Is buried. As if he'd had nothing to do with it.

But he told the truth. She was buried there.

He'd buried her purse with her, too.

When I returned to see him after that, he said, "Now we go back to our original bargain. You finish the book, I give you the rest of them."

I dreaded finding out what he meant by *the rest of them.*

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Fortunately, from our point of view, we were working in a county where the coroner had to be a licensed physician, which gave me more confidence in the report we got from her office than I might have had from a coroner in a county where literally anybody could do the job.

Susan had been stabbed and strangled, as had Erin Belafonte.

But then, we already knew that, because Darren Betch had told us so.

What we hadn't known until Detective Cannistre had a deputy deliver a copy of the coroner's report to us was that the first victim was 5'5" tall, thin, 110 pounds, with dark hair cut to shoulder length. A pair of prescription eyeglasses had been found in the grave with her. From her reluctant mother, Markie had learned that she was an only child. She had been a child-care worker at a day-care center, and a high-school graduate with no college. When those facts and a few others got put up on the wall under her name, the four of us stood back and looked at what we now had about all four of Betch's known victims.

Our heads swiveled back and forth from one section of white paper to another as we took it all in.

For a while, there was silence.

Then . . . "Uh," said Peter.

"Marie?" said Deborah.

"Yes, I see it," I told her.

"We've got a problem," Markie said, sounding disgusted.

"No." I reached for the motel telephone. "The cops have a problem. What we have is a more interesting book." When I got through to Luis Cannistre, I said, "I think you'd better get over here."

It was all on the walls, clear as the North Dakota sky outside our rooms.

Now that there were four victims we could finally see that two of them fit together in a pattern and two of them clearly did not. Susan and Erin Belafonte: both around 5'5", both about 110 pounds, both with dark hair worn straight and shoulder-length and with bangs that touched their eyebrows, both child-care workers, both high-school educated with no college, both wore eyeglasses, both only children. The last two victims, the two friends, weren't anything like that portrait: They were older, for starters, blond hair, red hair, short hair, curly hair, a master's degree, a bachelor's degree. Both had siblings. Neither wore glasses or even contacts. One was a saleswoman for a national car-rental company; the other worked for an advertising firm.

Markie Lentz said, "Two killers."

"But Darren Betch confessed!" Peter exclaimed, in tones of outrage.

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"He may have done it to protect himself," Cannistre said, looking like a man who wanted to kick himself from there to California. "Think about it. Here was a guy who had gone around pretending to be Native American and he was facing going into a prison where there's a big Indian population. They were *not* going to appreciate that. He knew how unlikely it was that he'd ever get out on appeal. He was there to stay, and he had a more immediate concern. He had to worry about staying alive. One murder made him ordinary. Three murders made him a very bad guy that the other inmates were a whole lot less likely to mess with."

"But he still uses the Indian thing," Deborah said.

"And by now they probably all believe it," Cannistre said.

Confession or not, our walls showed there was more evidence to suggest that Darren killed the first two but somebody else killed the other two. Betch had tossed Susan Lerner's purse into the grave he dug for her, and he'd done the same with Erin Belafonte's purse. Jessica Burge's purse, on the other hand, had been found at her apartment, along with her friend Caroline Meyers's purse. Not only that, but both Susan and Erin had hundreds of dollars taken from their checking accounts right after they disappeared. Jessie's and Caroline's accounts were untouched. It appeared to be two completely different M.O.'s, perpetrated against two completely different pairs of girls.

The first time I had spoken to Luis Cannistre, I had asked him if he had a favorite suspect. Now I found myself asking him again. "If Darren didn't kill the last two women, then who's your most likely suspect?"

Markie Lentz interjected his own list of possibilities:

"There's the abusive fiancé, the parents with the rough business partners, the suicidal father who felt 'guilty,' the sponge of a brother."

"No," Cannistre said, looking thoughtful and unhappy, "none of those."

"Wait." I walked closer to Markie and Peter's side of the walls, wishing now I had paid more attention when they were gathering information about the friends and families of the victims. What I now saw there made me turn around and ask the detective, "When we met with the families in my room . . . why did you say, 'Typical'?"

Divers found them, or rather a watch that one of them had worn and other jewelry the other had worn, at the bottom of the biggest lake outside of Bismarck.

There are no lakes in Tucson, Arizona.

Jessica Burge's mother and father had moved to the desert, as far away as they could get from reminders of what they'd done, or rather failed to do. They had not murdered their child and her friend, but they had kept everyone from finding out how the girls had died.

"What made them your favorite suspects, after Darren?" I

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asked Cannistre.

"They never cooperated the way the others did. Everybody else took lie-detector tests, but not them. They claimed they didn't trust us, didn't trust the system, didn't trust anybody. At the time it looked suspicious, but then we arrested Darren, and everybody assumed he had killed them all, so we let it go. And then Darren confessed to killing them. I never thought about it again."

They'd had their 36-foot cabin cruiser out on the lake and they had Jessica and her friend Caroline with them. It had been a spontaneous trip. Nobody knew they went. They towed along the little motorboat they used for water skiing. The girls, who had been drinking beer all afternoon, took it out to ski. Jessie lost control of the boat while Caroline was up on the skis, running over her friend. Panicked, drunk, Jessie overcompensated at the wheel and the boat turned over.

From the cruiser, Jessie's parents saw it all. They too were drunk.

They were afraid of being charged with negligent homicide.

They were afraid of being sued by Caroline's parents.

Knowing there was already one girl missing from the city, they went back home and two days later called in their own missing-person report, leaving Caroline's family to report her gone, as well.

They allowed the other family to grieve for twelve years without knowing what had really happened to their daughter.

"Why'd you do it, Darren?" I asked him. "Why did you take the rap for two murders you didn't do?"

His trademark smirk was in place. "I don't have to tell you everything."

"All right." I had a feeling that Detective Cannistre had the correct theory on that, which meant there was no way that this man's overweening pride was ever going to let him say, *I pretended to be an Indian, and I was afraid of what the real ones might do to me in here, so I had to look tough.* "Well, here it is," I said, pushing a pile of pages across the table at him. "Here's your book. Or some of it."

"What do you mean, some of it?"

I looked into his eyes. "Our deal was that I'd finish the book and you'd give me the other bodies. But we already found them, didn't we? So what do we need you for?"

"But that just makes it a more interesting book," he said, grinning.

It was exactly what I had said to Markie and our assistants.

Darren wasn't getting it, he wasn't understanding, so I got up and started to leave.

"Wait a minute," he called out from behind me. "You're going to finish it, right? Where are you going?"

I turned back to look at him. "I'm going home."

"Not yet, you aren't. You've got to finish it. We've got to talk about publicity, all that stuff."

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"There's not going to be any publicity, Darren."

His eyes narrowed, his jaws stopped chewing his gum, and he stared at me.

"There's not going to be any publicity," I said, "because there's never going to be a published book."

He stood up, but then sat down again fast when it caught the guard's attention.

"We have a deal!"

I shook my head. "We're done. There never was going to be a book. Did you really think I'd let you blackmail me into publishing a book for you? Did you really think you could play those kinds of awful games with me, and win?"

"You have a contract with your publisher!"

"Who agreed to tear it up."

And Markie was being paid a lump sum for his contributions.

I could admit to myself, even if to no one else, that there had been moments when I'd been tempted. Markie had even tried to persuade me. We both knew it would have been a big seller.

I turned again to leave.

"There were other girls," he blurted.

My heart sank. I believed him. But I turned around and said coolly, "There are other writers, too."

At the airport, Markie and Peter's plane left before mine.

I thanked them and said, "Maybe we'll work together again."

"No way." Markie gave me his last shot. "I'm the rabbit, you're the tortoise."

"Which means I win in the end," I pointed out.

He grinned and hurried off toward his gate with Peter running behind him.

Luis Cannistre flashed his badge so he could walk Deb and me to our gate.

Once there, I held out my right hand and he took it.

"You don't fly your own plane?" he asked with a smile, taking up where we had left off in our original conversation.

"No, but I sign my own books." I turned to Deb and she handed me an autographed copy of the new one that wasn't even in the bookstores yet. I handed it to him.

"Well, thank you," he said, looking pleased. "For everything."

He gave Deborah one of his wry smiles and winked at her. "But I'll bet that's the last time she answers her own phone." ●

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Cry Before Midnight

by Donald Olson

That a caterpillar could turn into a butterfly seemed a less remarkable feat of nature than the transformation of the girlhood friend Anna so fondly remembered into this willow-thin, middle-aged woman, brown as a gypsy, with a mane of strawlike hair which looked as if it had been trimmed in a windstorm with a pair of pruning shears.

"My dear, I swear to goodness I wouldn't have known you," declared Anna as they drove toward the lake under a brooding late-autumn sky.

She had prepared herself for a certain shock of unrecognition when she picked Maureen up at the airport. Although Maureen had dutifully kept up her end of the correspondence, unlike Anna she had never sent so much as a single snapshot to record the inevitable change in appearance over the twenty-five years since they'd last seen each other. Consequently, Anna still carried in her mind the image of a seventeen-year-old girl inclined to plumpness, with excitable brown eyes and feather-cut raisin-colored hair.

It was of their childhood days that Anna chattered all the way to the house, as if wanting to forestall the questions Maureen must have been dying to ask ever since receiving Anna's urgently worded telegram.

"I'm impressed, girl," said Maureen as they climbed out of the car. "You did yourself proud."

Anna pursed her babyish lips. "A prison, that's what it's been." Though undeniably an imposing one: a tree-girdled red-brick colonial, all massive chimneys, creeping ivy, and black shutters, with a sweeping stone-balustraded terrace overlooking the lake, slate-colored now under a dull metallic sky.

Anna helped Maureen with her bags. "A hatbox? Don't tell me women wear hats in the wilds of New Mexico."

Maureen smiled. "I don't use it for hats." In the foyer she unstrapped the lid and carefully lifted out a heavy receptacle. "One of my replicas of a Cochiti polychrome storage jar." Globe-shaped, with a short tapering neck about as wide as a fist, it was decorated with a bird motif between bands of brilliant black and red. "The perforated stopper's my own concession to modernity, so it can be used for a variety of purposes."

Anna gushed over the workmanship but when she would have examined it more closely Maureen stopped her with a laugh. "No, no, mustn't touch. It's a gift for Carter."

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"For Carter?"

"Oh, I have something for you, too, but I thought Carter might be less antagonistic—if I brought him something special. You wrote about his passion for rock candy. Well, the jar's full of rock candy."

Anna bit her lips and looked worried. "How sweet of you, but I'm afraid Carter's gone."

"Gone?"

"Come into the living room. I'll fix us drinks before you unpack. I'm dying to tell you everything."

"Things can't possibly be as desperate as your telegram implied." In the other room Maureen fished the telegram from her snakeskin bag and read it aloud: *"Something terrible has happened. Need you desperately. Don't fail me. Come at once."*

An endless flow of long, intimate letters had kept the friendship alive, Anna's far more emotionally extravagant than Maureen's, but it was probably that difference in temperament that helped account for the youthful bond between them. After high school Anna had married well, moved to Porthaven, lost a baby in childbirth. Neurotic complications had ensued, contributing to the gradual erosion of the marriage while Anna poured out her misery and self-pity in effusively indiscreet letters to her friend across the continent.

Maureen, the loner, the artist and dreamer, had eventually settled down near one of those historic Pueblo ruins in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains south of Taos, New Mexico. There she had established her own pottery, eking out a modest legacy from a deceased aunt by selling her works in shops around Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Her descriptions of the solitary life had filled Anna with horror; she could not conceive of such an existence, without even a phone or running water, but she'd had the good taste not to express her distaste, for that flow of letters had become as essential a lifeline to her as blood transfusions to a hemophiliac. *Without you I would go insane* became a recurring theme in her letters to Maureen. Anna's husband Carter, as much a victim of the doomed marriage as Anna, regarded the correspondence with sardonic disapproval, using words like "unhealthy" and "pathological."

Now Maureen regarded the other woman with a faintly sceptical look, as if the telegram couldn't have been dispatched by the same person who sat facing her with no sign of mental distress in her heavy-lidded, protuberant blue eyes. "You always did have a talent for hyperbole."

"I meant every word! It was the last straw. The final crisis."

"You're talking about Carter."

"Who else?" Over the years Anna's voice had acquired an habitually carping tone.

"So why didn't you leave him? You never did give me a straight answer in your letters. And all that rubbish about planning to kill yourself. Really, girl."

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"I meant that, too. I even changed my will, just as I told you. Everything I have goes to you."

Maureen lifted her hand and with the fingernail of her pinky scratched delicately at the corner of her eyebrow. "There are less drastic ways of ending a marriage."

"How could I leave Carter? At my age? What would I do? Where would I go? We had a frightful row the other night, the very worst."

"That's when he left?"

"Yes." Anna's lips quivered, her gaze falling away from Maureen's intense scrutiny.

"So I should think your problem is solved. It's what you wanted, isn't it? To be rid of Carter?"

"If it were only that simple."

"You mean he's not gone for good?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Girl, what is it you're not telling me?"

Anna flung her hands apart. "Oh, so much. I could tell you anything in a letter, but now . . . I thought it would be so easy." Indeed, pouring out her soul to the visionary Maureen, the distant mother confessor, was quite different from exposing herself to this flesh-and-blood Maureen with her piercing, cynical way of cutting through Anna's flabby defenses. "Give me a little time," she pleaded. "Let's get you settled first. You must be exhausted. I'll show you your room and you can have a rest from me while I prepare dinner."

Back in the foyer, Maureen said: "So much for my gift for dear Carter."

Anna looked wistfully at the painted jar. "I'm afraid candy is strictly forbidden in my case. I've been diabetic for years."

"I know."

Anna looked a bit shamefaced. "I wonder if there's anything about me you *don't* know."

"Thanks to your letters, I could probably write the definitive biography of Anna Lyman, complete with footnotes."

"Carter always said I didn't know the meaning of the word restraint."

"And such a memory. I'd all but forgotten many of the little escapades and secrets we shared."

Anna sighed. "Such happy times. At least I had a carefree childhood. Anyway, the jar is lovely. I'll put it in Carter's study for now."

"Better let me, it's quite heavy. Just show me where."

Over dinner, Anna continued to evade Maureen's questions, prompting her friend to talk instead about her own experiences "in the Wild West," and then trying to disguise her boredom as Maureen rattled on about the Pueblos and their customs, on one of which she appeared to have become an authority. Lecturing Anna on everything from the symbolic importance of the eagle and antelope in Pueblo culture to the grisly aspects of religious dances

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she'd witnessed in the *kivas,* where whipsnakes and diamondback rattlers are smothered in cornmeal by the Pueblo women and then fearlessly snatched up by feather-bedecked male dancers.

Having got more than she bargained for, Anna finally managed to interject a question relating to a matter more to her interest. "What about Prudence?"

Maureen frowned, her little fingernail raking the thick dark hairs of her eyebrow, an apparently unconscious mannerism. "What about Prudence?"

"Did you ever hear from her again?"

"Thank God, no. I've no idea what became of her."

"I think it all must have disturbed you even more than you let on. Your letters seemed different somehow after that."

"Different?"

"I don't know—less forthcoming in a way. Poor dear, it must have been awkward for you."

"Awkward is hardly the word, girl. Of course I should never have allowed Prudence to move in on me the way she did."

In her letters Maureen had pictured Prudence Colefax as a loner like herself, a fugitive from conventional society in need of a temporary sanctuary. By then the pottery was flourishing and Maureen had welcomed a pair of willing and eager hands. But then apparently something had gone wrong, a conflict of personalities. The young woman had revealed a domineering streak, began making demands on Maureen, who in her letters to Anna had even implied a suspicion of mental instability in Prudence. Only when Maureen had caught the imprudent Prudence stealing money from her had she put her foot down and ordered the woman to leave.

"You sort of left me hanging after that," recalled Anna. "Then everything seemed fine when you finally wrote again."

Maureen nodded. "Oh, she took off meekly enough when I finally got up the gumption to boot her out."

Over coffee, Maureen maneuvered the conversation back to Anna's mysterious trouble. "If I'm to help you, girl, I have to know precisely what the problem is. You said in one of your letters that if it weren't for Carter you'd pack your bags and come West, at least for a vacation. That might be a very sensible idea. We could be partners. Quite frankly, my little business could do with an infusion of fresh capital. It might be a very good investment for you."

This unexpected proposal was accompanied by a more vigorous raking of the eyebrow. By now this mannerism had begun to provoke a vaguely uncomfortable sensation in Anna's mind; not annoyance, but something as disturbingly elusive as the shadow of a memory that refuses to surface.

"Can you see me living in an adobe hut in the mountains?" Anna laughed.

"It's rather more than a hut, girl. I'm not the primitive I used to

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be. The change would do you good."

Anna was finding it increasingly hard to concentrate, distracted by that nagging hint of a memory, or was it only her imagination, she wondered.

"As for my investing in anything, that's hardly feasible at the moment, everything's in such a muddle."

"You're confusing me, Anna. All those hints of some earth-shaking crisis. If it's so bad you can't even tell me what it is, I can't see the point of my having dropped everything to fly out here."

"I'm sorry, Maureen. It isn't something I can just blurt out. Oh, if only you knew how distressing it's all been." Anna realized she was waffling now, deliberately evading the issue, not from any faltering of resolve but because she dared not risk confiding in Maureen before she'd had a chance to pin down whatever was troubling her at the moment even more than the Carter problem.

"Have you decided you can't trust me, is that what's stopping you?" Maureen asked. Anna dropped her eyes, disconcerted by this seemingly clairvoyant observation.

"It's not that at all, dear. My brain's all topsy-turvy. I haven't had a decent night's sleep in weeks. My mother used to say, cry before midnight, you'll laugh with the dawn. Believe me, it doesn't work. And I know you must be tired. I promise I'll tell you everything in the morning."

Maureen had to settle for that, although with a visible air of dissatisfaction. As soon as they'd parted for the night and Anna was alone in her room, she rushed to the closet and pulled down the shoebox holding all the letters she'd received from Maureen over the past score of years. Unfortunately, she had no precise recollection of when she had received that particular letter; for all she knew her imagination might indeed be playing tricks on her. The idea seemed so outlandish, so implausible. At least Maureen had always typed her letters, which made the chore somewhat easier.

The downstairs clock had chimed midnight before she found the specific letter and passage she was looking for. The muscles of her throat tightened as she devoured the words.

Now that we live in this atmosphere of smoldering hostility everything about Prudence annoys me, especially that irritating little quirk she has of digging at the corner of her eyebrow with her little fingernail. It quite sets my teeth on edge. . . .

Making an effort to suppress a swelling tide of panic, Anna carefully refolded the letter, replaced it in the shoebox, and returned the box to the closet shelf. She tried to tell herself that it wasn't uncommon for one person who has lived with another for a long period of time to adopt, perhaps unconsciously, certain physical mannerisms, just as one tends to appropriate individual turns of phrase and pungent expressions. Oh, if only Maureen had sent snapshots of herself or of Prudence Colefax. Prudence must have

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known Maureen never had or she would not have dared venture upon such a risky impersonation. That Maureen should have mentioned in her letters something as insignificant as one of Prudence's minor peculiarities obviously had not occurred to her or she might have suspected it could be a dead giveaway.

But what did it mean? If Prudence had not disappeared then what had happened to Maureen? Now a fresh and sinister construction could be placed upon that discernible change in the tone of the letters after Prudence had allegedly "gone away." Naturally, Prudence would not have dared discontinue the correspondence, not while there was a chance Anna might grow anxious, make inquiries, or even fly out to New Mexico, as she might have done.

Money. That had to be the only reason to induce Prudence—if the woman in the other bedroom was indeed Prudence—to chance coming out here. She smelled money. And what stronger inducement could there have been than Anna's disclosure about leaving everything she owned to Maureen? What this implied about Prudence's motives sent a convulsive shiver through Anna's body.

Panic gave way to despair. What was she to do? Instead of only one pressing problem, what to do about the Carter situation, she now had two to worry about. Neither decision could be put off indefinitely. Anna felt more helpless and alone than ever. And frightened.

By dawn she had thought of a way to verify her suspicions. Casually, at the breakfast table, she said: "I meant to ask you in one of my letters, Maureen—oh, this must have happened the third or fourth year you were out there—you'd taken that trip to Mexico and had your lovely emerald ring stolen in that hotel. Did you ever get it back?"

The other woman worried her eyebrow, then smiled absently. "Never did. Not that I expected to."

"Pity," murmured Anna. "You were so fond of that ring."

A cold lump formed in her throat. So far as she knew, Maureen had never owned an emerald ring.

The irony of her position was not lost upon Anna. Under normal circumstances all she need do was phone the police. That was unthinkable, of course. What she must do was to get rid of the woman, as quickly as possible, and the only way to do that was to scare the creature into leaving.

"Anna, the last thing on my mind right now is a lost ring. No more beating about the bush. I insist you tell me what's put you in such a dither. Is it about Carter?"

"Why do you think that?"

"What else could it be, for Pete's sake?"

"All right, yes, it's about Carter. It's just—it's not easy to know where to start—to make you understand . . ."

"You were unhappy with Carter. You had a fight."

"A dreadful row." Anna, formulating a plan, looked toward the

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window facing the lake. "I always go for a stroll along the shore after breakfast. It'll be easier to talk there, out in the open."

The other woman rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh of exasperation. "Whatever you say."

They carried the dishes into the kitchen. Anna said: "It'll be chilly by the water. You'll need a coat."

"My shawl will suffice."

"I think not. You can borrow one of my coats."

Upstairs, her heart pounding, Anna flung open the solid oak closet door. "Help yourself. Pick out something warm."

As the other woman stepped into the closet Anna shoved her forward, slammed the door shut, and turned the key in the lock, provoking a startled cry of protest.

Anna leaned heavily against the door, as if its lock might not withstand the expected assault from within; instead, that first cry was followed by a long moment of silence.

Anna cried: "You're not Maureen. I know who you are."

"Are you mad, Anna? What's come over you? Let me out."

"You're Prudence. What did you do to Maureen?"

"Stop playing games, girl. Open this door at once."

"Not until you tell me the truth."

"You're behaving like a child. I won't tell you anything until you open this door."

"Why did you come? To talk me into going back with you? Then what? Kill me? Bury me out there on some mountain? Is that what happened to Maureen?"

The knob rattled violently, causing Anna to press her body even more firmly against the door. "You'd better start talking before you run out of air."

"I came here to help you, Anna."

"Ha!"

"It's the truth, I swear it. You're weak, Anna. You were always a crybaby. Boo-hooing in all those letters. Caught in a trap, you said. Can't get out. Can't get free. Anna, I was going to set you free. I thought Carter would be here. I had a plan. I can prove it if you'll only open this door and let me out."

Anna's brain was working feverishly. "I can hear you perfectly well from in there. You tell me the truth or I'll go away and leave you in there. Nobody will come near this place. You can pound on the door till your knuckles are raw, nobody will hear you."

A longer silence ensued, and then in a wheedling tone of entreaty: "All right, Anna, you win. I'll tell you everything if you just open the door a crack. I won't hurt you. You need me, Anna. We need each other. We have to plan things before Carter comes back."

"Carter's not coming back."

"Then why did you send for me?"

"I sent for Maureen, not for you."

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"Maureen wouldn't have helped you. Maureen was sick and tired of your endless bellyaching. She said so. She felt sorry for Carter. I'm not like Maureen. I'm not afraid to do what has to be done. Please, Anna, open the door."

"Maureen's dead, isn't she?"

"I can explain that. Just let me out."

"You stay put. I'll be right back."

Anna moved swiftly from the room and down the stairs to Carter's study. Bellyaching, indeed. As if Maureen would ever say such a thing. But had she been overconfident in taking it for granted that Maureen would help her? Prudence, on the other hand, would have no choice. And Anna knew she couldn't do it alone. It had been struggle enough dragging Carter's corpulent body down into the cellar. She couldn't possibly have hauled it back up here and out into the garden and buried it.

In the study she unlocked Carter's desk and took out the revolver, somehow surprised that it wasn't still warm to the touch. The sight of it brought back all too vividly the events of that awful night. Carter screaming that he was leaving her, that he'd had enough. The wave of panic and hysteria. The gun suddenly in her hand, exploding. And then the frightening sense of helplessness, the desperate need for someone to take charge, tell her what to do. Someone she loved and trusted more than anyone else in the world: Maureen.

She was not about to open that closet door without the gun to protect her. Prudence was insane, even Maureen had hinted at that. But Prudence would be obliged to help her. Anna was aware of a bitter acid taste in her mouth, a taste of bile, recalling the wave of nausea as she'd looked down at Carter's oozing body. Her mouth was sour with that same nasty taste. As she turned to leave the room she saw the Pueblo jar on the library table by the window. A piece of candy would take that nasty taste away. One little piece of candy wouldn't kill her.

Dropping the gun, she quickly snatched out the perforated stopper and plunged her hand deep into the bowl of the jar. She would never know which came first, the biting sting as she jerked her hand free, or that flashing glimpse of something unspeakably hideous, the lightning-swift movement of something cordlike and alive. Anna fainted.

Once the rattler's venom enters the bloodstream, variable factors govern the progressive symptoms leading to death. By the time Anna had regained consciousness, paralysis had already invaded her limbs. Coma would ensue. From a distance the weakening sound of a fist hammering upon unyielding wood seemed to echo the faltering rhythm of those dying heartbeats. ●

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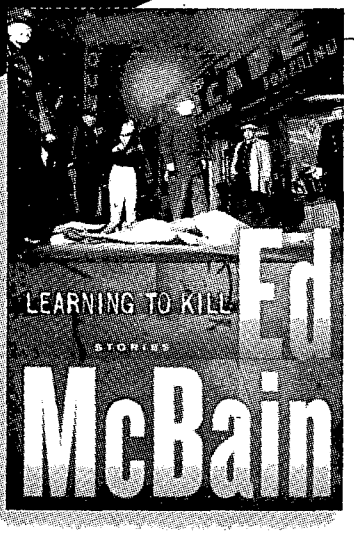

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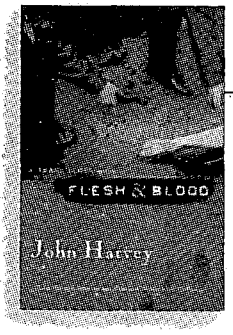

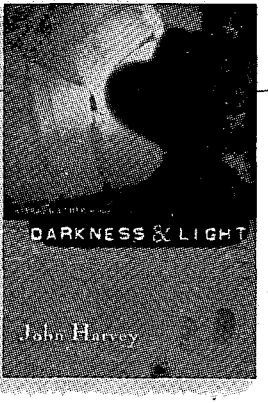

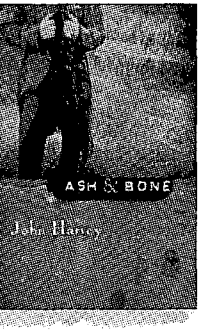

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Art by Allen Davis

CAGEBIRD

by Margaret Lawrence

My name is Harriet Burge. On the twenty-sixth of October of the year 1883, I discovered the body of Mrs. Elizabeth Logan hanging by a curtain cord from a ceiling hook in the after-cabin of the American brig *China Star,* a square-rigger bound for Singapore and Hong Kong.

Mrs. Logan was but nineteen, and had married our captain, Dayton Logan, three years earlier in Maine. In my experience, unless they are besotted or bewitched, beautiful girls of sixteen do not wed sea captains of near fifty.

But Eliza was not beautiful, nor was her character striking. In fact, she had seemed to me a young woman of limited possibilities—conventional, soft-spoken, made for narrow horizons. And as Logan was said to have money, I presumed to judge them both.

I knew I was sadly mistaken from the moment I glimpsed her hanging there, with the heavy dark-green cord from the door curtains looped around her long thin neck. In death's release, she had become breathtakingly lovely, quite transfigured. This, I thought, was the woman Logan had seen and desired, perhaps even loved. Her black hair hung loose around her narrow face, and her pale skin gleamed with the purity of an ice crystal.

❖ ❖ ❖

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In addition to the ceiling hook through which the green cord was looped, there were several others, and from them hung intricate wickerwork cages of tiny, bright-eyed songbirds, hopping and twittering. When the *Star* called at Palermo on its way to Suez, and thence to Singapore and Hong Kong, an Italian bird-vendor had come aboard to show his wares, and Dayton Logan had bought several for his wife—finches, canaries, song sparrows.

In fact, he seemed to shower Eliza with luxuries. A little spinet stood in one corner of the cabin, and a sewing machine had been screwed to a small table for her use. The dark blue Brussels carpet with its pattern of roses and acanthus was smooth, undisturbed, and scrupulously clean. The gilt-framed mirror, the brass lamp above the long, black walnut chart table, and the polished glasses of barometer and thermometer gleamed richly.

A historian with a doctorate in medieval drama, Margaret Lawrence has taught at several colleges in the Midwest. Her works of fiction include 1996's *Hearts and Bones,* the first in a mystery series set in Revolutionary War-era Maine, which won nominations for the Edgar, Agatha, Anthony, and Macavity awards for best novel. ¶

The *China Star* was what the booking agent in London had called a "hen coop." It was the seamen's term for a ship that carried the wife—and sometimes the children—of its master aboard, and there were many of them, from whalers to packet boats, roaming the seas at that time.

To shorebound women, the life seemed bizarre. "No respectable woman would live surrounded by all those rough sailors!" my Devonshire aunt had cried. "Wife or no wife, she must be a low, immoral creature!"

"A married woman may very well civilize the crew," I told her. "Besides, Cousin Philip sails to Hong Kong on business for his bank, so I shall have an escort. And I must go out to Papa at once, ill as he is."

"Hmmph! If you had a grain of sense, Philip Rossiter would be your husband now, instead of being wed to that silly chit of his. Cornelia Plambeck, indeed! You mark my words, Harriet. Philip's not over you. And strange things happen at sea."

The voyage seemed endless. I despised ocean travel, and after eight years on Aunt's farm, life aboard ship made me tentative and unsteady in spirit. In my familiar world of chicken feed and mousetraps and cabbages, I had had no doubt that it was right to refuse Philip's offer of marriage three years before. He had no prospects, and I had feared the strength of my own feelings for him. I called it prudence then, but I was to learn a truer name for

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it aboard the *China Star.*

Philip had secured his post with the London and Colonial Bank a month after my refusal, and had proposed to Miss Plambeck soon after. As for myself, I was still only twenty-six, and I had a small inheritance from my mother and enough work to content me. On the farm, with my unhappy father on the other side of the world, I had at last felt perfectly complete. I did not care to marry, nor, for that matter, to love.

But once at sea, in ceaseless motion and with all that dark element of ocean breathing beneath me like a secret self, I had lost my smug certainties. Philip's nearness, too, unsettled me. Did I love him, after all? Or did I merely want what I could no longer have?

So it was that I stood, on that terrible October morning, in the small, overfurnished after-cabin of the *Star,* with the shadow of Eliza Logan's body upon me, and felt my hold upon my own destiny slipping away.

"Harriet?" said Philip's voice, out of nowhere. "Hallie, my dearest!"

He stood motionless in the open door of the companionway, his fair hair drifting in the sea breeze, his grey eyes wide and fixed. "God in heaven," he whispered, staring up at the body.

I did not reply. As my cousin entered the room I noticed a sound of running water from beyond the green *velours* curtain that concealed the captain's stateroom and bath. But aboard ship one exists in a womb of water, the sound of it filling even one's dreams. I stood listening, trying to sort the real from the unreal.

I did not succeed. The birds flew up again. Overwhelmed, I sank down on the long, brown plush sofa built into the curve of the stern and forced myself to take deep breaths.

"Has no one else seen her?" Philip murmured. "It's gone eight bells. Surely Stoddard and McKenzie have been here?"

They were the first and second mates—Stoddard middle-aged, foully profane, with a face like a steamed pudding; McKenzie in his thirties, with dark auburn hair, a courtly Scots' manner, and wide boyish eyes that reminded me of my cousin's.

"I have seen neither of them," I told him. "And this is the captain's private parlor. Even they must have his permission to enter."

"They'll pay hob getting it now," he said quietly. "We've searched every inch of the ship for him. Logan's not to be found."

"But," I objected, "we won't make port at Gabinea for another day. Unless he took a lifeboat—"

Philip knelt down by me and took my hand. "Hallie, there are no boats missing. He's gone over the side."

I could feel his warm breath and smell the pipe tobacco he always kept in his breast pocket. His gentleness reached so deeply into me that it frightened me, just as it had back in Devon. *Control,* I thought. *Control yourself.* I took my hand away.

"Nothing can be done at Gabinea beyond a decent burial," he

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said, looking up again at Eliza's dead body. "But there's sure to be an enquiry once we reach Singapore. The American consul, and their maritime courts-martial. I think we must assemble what facts we can before then. Will you keep a record of anything we discover? With good records kept, we may be delayed for a shorter time, and with your father so ill—"

"Of course," I agreed.

Philip went to the desk that was suspended from the bulkhead and rummaged for pen and paper. "What brought you here so early this morning?" he said. "I feared for you when you were not at breakfast."

"Mrs. Logan had invited me to help her cut out a new gown," I replied—and everything in the room testified to the truth of what I said. A length of rose-colored calico, the ten yards it would require for a decent plain gown, lay folded on the sofa, along with Eliza's workbox, pincushion, measuring tape, a worn muslin pattern, and two pair of shears. "She said I must come early, before the table was needed for charting."

There was a ladderback chair lying on its side just under the body, and Philip picked it up. It was not high enough to have served Eliza as a scaffold. He laid a hand on her bare foot. "She still has a little warmth," he said. "The deed was done no earlier than first light, I should say. Logan must have come to himself and realized the horror of his crime. He'd have had to go over the side before the watch changed at six."

"You make your assumptions very easily," I snapped suddenly. "I have seen no proof of Captain Logan's guilt."

"Oh, Harriet, be reasonable. She is dead. He has disappeared."

It was too facile, and all circumstance. "There are no signs of struggle, either about her body or within this room," I said, "and surely she would have fought against a murderer, even her husband. If she took her own life, Captain Logan may have found her afterwards, been overwhelmed with grief, and so joined her in death. Or some third party may have done for both of them."

He shook his head. "If she did it herself, then how did she manage? It would take a ladder, but where is it? Who put it out of sight?"

"It is a puzzle," I admitted. "But if it was murder, why kill her in such a difficult way? Why not smother her, strangle her, slit her throat as she slept?"

My cousin was as stubborn as myself. "Very well. If she meant to die, why put out all this dressmaking gear? Why plan a new gown?"

"Even a suicide may intend to live, Philip, but she—or he—may be taken unawares. Seized in a moment." I reached out my hand into the liquid sea-light that all but overwhelmed the room now that the sun was fully up. "My mother went off to Hastings market with a careful list of things to buy and her string bag over her arm. She turned a corner, saw an omnibus, and walked in front of

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it. My father exiled us both to the other side of the world, and now he will die in Hong Kong and his penance will be complete."

"Oh, my Harriet," Philip said. "Oh, my dear."

He did not love his Cornelia, we both knew that. He drew me against him and kissed my hair.

I sat at Logan's odd little desk and began my notes, as Philip, the second mate McKenzie, and a passenger called Pruitt took Eliza's body down from its hook.

They laid her carefully on the chart table and McKenzie went through the green *velours* curtains to the stateroom to fetch a sheet in which to wrap her.

Mr. Pruitt went off to find something they might use to lash the body to the table, in case we met with rough seas. Once we were alone, Philip came to stand beside me. I thought him about to apologize for the liberties he had taken earlier. But I had offered no resistance, after all.

"Harriet," he said awkwardly, "you've been on these tropical voyages often enough to understand. I mean, the heat— If we are in any way delayed in reaching Gabinea—"

I understood at once. "Of course. She will have to be buried at sea."

"At Gabinea, there would be a physician to perform a simple postmortem before burial. But here— It would hardly be seemly for me to examine her. Or the Scotsman, either."

Back in the stateroom, I was certain I could hear McKenzie sobbing.

"As I am the only woman aboard," I said calmly, "I shall do it, of course."

They left me alone with the body and I locked the companionway door, so that only the cagebirds could overlook us. Eliza was dressed in the plain calico wrapper she wore for sleeping. A white muslin nightdress, she had told me shyly, was too sheer to be decent if she were forced to appear before the crew, due to "some emergency."

I drew back the blue-flowered cloth from her. There was a tiny triangular hole near the hem of the wrapper, but I did not regard it. Impossible for a woman to exist aboard ship and not spoil her clothing.

When I saw Eliza's body completely uncovered, I was taken aback once more by her beauty and by how very young she was, how utterly clean and perfect. I discovered no sign of a beating, nor any mark of Logan's—or anyone's—rage.

The cord about her neck had left a cruel burn and a deep cut in the pale flesh, however, and on closer examination I discovered another mark, too—so thin a line that I at first mistook it for one of her dark hairs. It was deeper than a scratch, and I could see that it ran all the way around her throat, as though some leash

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had been fastened there.

I covered her again, and noted down my observations. The men were, I knew, growing impatient to come in and secure the body. But I had promised myself a private visit beyond those green curtains.

I pushed them aside and stepped into a little corridor. The bathroom opened off to the left; besides the w.c., it contained a marble basin for washing hands, into which water was piped from the ship's main tanks. Logan's shaving things were there, though not recently used. He had given up all personal care of himself in the week since we called in at the Palmer Islands.

But someone had surely been here when I discovered the body—the running water I was certain I had heard. The murderer—if murder it was—might have opened the bathroom tap for some reason, and then, hearing my boots on the companionway stair, made his escape in too much haste to shut off the spigot completely.

But the tap was not running now. And where had he gone? If he made for the deck, we should have met in the companionway. And there was no means of escape through the stateroom. Might he not have crossed through the after-cabin, knocking over the chair in his haste, and hidden himself beyond, in the larger forward cabin, which was the dining parlor for the mates and the captain? I had never entered that room. If there were doors leading out from it—

Still, it was all surmise. What I needed was some clue to the man's identity. I lighted the oil lamp on the wall, took it down from its sconce, and held it to the washbasin. There were several hairs behind the tap, and I picked them out and brought them near to the light.

A few were grey—Logan's, surely. Two were Eliza's—long and coal black. But one—only one—was short, wavy, and dark reddish brown.

McKenzie. No one else aboard had such hair. And he had wept just now in the stateroom. Clearly he had felt more for Eliza than duty required. But he had been part of the search for Captain Logan, so unless he was able to be in two places at once, it could not have been he who set the bathroom tap running.

I extinguished the lamp and went along to the stateroom. There were many cupboards and lockers built onto the walls, and there was, of course, the swinging bed of which Eliza had once told me—an expensive feather-mattressed contraption attached to balancing-devices, so that it swung exactly as the ship moved, in storm or in calm. Another of Logan's baffling kindnesses, to fend off seasickness.

But it was not all that intrigued me about the stateroom. A woman's bedroom, I puzzled, and not a Berlin-work cushion or a scent bottle or a framed sampler or a china hair-receiver or a tortoiseshell comb? Who had this young woman been, after all, this odd mingling of shy girlishness and Spartan plainness? This child of barely nineteen—had her husband really known her? Had anyone?

"Old Logan was half mad, and everyone aboard knew it," I had

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heard Mr. Pruitt say to my cousin. But Captain Dayton Logan had seemed to me a sensible, amiable man until *China Star* left the port of Tacoya in the Palmer Islands.

"Won't you come along, Miss Burge?" Eliza had asked me on the morning we docked there. "I see the *Nancy Bright* is in port. That's Mrs. Captain Thomas. I made her acquaintance in Suez, you know, and she begged I should call upon her, if we met again."

The hen-coop wives made it a duty to know one another, and their visits were paid in great state, with parasols and best bonnets. Starved of society, they took their chance at it when they could.

But I am English, and I had not been invited by the hostess. I went sightseeing with Philip instead. And Eliza Logan, dressed in an apricot-colored gown that made her look almost handsome, went alone to the *Nancy Bright.*

Or did she? When Philip and I returned from our expedition, it was apparent that something more had happened that day than a mere friendly visit. Captain Logan had locked himself into one of the empty staterooms. Eliza could be heard furiously playing hymns on her spinet far into the night. And the Scotsman, McKenzie, had a bandage on his forearm.

No one saw Logan for four days and nights after that, and when at last he did appear on deck, he was unshaven and unwashed, and wore a tattered old dressing gown with his captain's bars sewn onto the sleeve.

He never regained himself after that day at Tacoya. He had lost himself somewhere, and could not find his way back.

It was well that we had lashed Eliza's body to the chart table, for on the same night a storm blew up. It did the *China Star* no great damage, but for two days afterwards we met with strong headwinds. At dawn on the third morning, with no likelihood of making port soon, the Scotsman said a prayer for the soul of Elizabeth Logan, and we gave her to the sea.

"Mr. McKenzie," I said afterwards, catching his sleeve. "I believe I have left my *sal volatile* in the after-cabin. Will you unlock the door for me, so that I may search for it?"

In truth, I never carry smelling salts. I despise fainting females. But I had put on my black dress with jet beading for the burial, and with a drift of veil over my fair hair I looked, though I say it myself, like one of Mr. Dickens' guileless heroines.

It needed only the mention of smelling salts to put the gentlemanly Scot at my mercy.

"I'll gladly fetch it myself," he said, "if you've a notion whereabouts—"

But in the instant he was interrupted by an outburst of shouting, followed by the smack of a fist and a sharp yowl from the pimply cabin boy. "*Found* it?" shouted the first mate, Stoddard, his

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face red as beet root. "Stole it, you mean, you greasy little bastard! First a good Virginia ham and two bottles of French brandy from the steward's pantry, and now a necklace, damn your eyes!"

"I didn't steal nothin'," whined the boy. "If I'd'a stole it, what'd I come tell you for? Likely it was rats got that ham."

"Rats cotton to women's gewgaws, too, do they? I oughta whale the hide off you and dump you over the side! Little bastard!"

Just then Stoddard caught sight of me. He forgot the cabin boy and came lounging over, grinning his usual suggestive grin. "This here brat's brung me your neck chain, lady," he said, launching a kick at the boy as he slithered away. "'Spect you'd like it back, eh?"

It was a cheap gold chain, and broken. The two ends dangled, though the clasp remained fastened. If there had ever been a locket or a cameo, it had been lost. "Thank you, sir," I told Stoddard, and reached out my gloved hand for it. "I shall be glad to have it again."

But he jerked it away. "That all I get, missy?" he said, leering. "'Thank you' won't keep me warm nights."

I saw McKenzie's fists tighten. "Give her the necklace, man," he said, "and be quiet. Haven't we enough trouble?"

For a moment, I was certain they would come to blows, but suddenly Stoddard burst into laughter. He relinquished the chain and I slipped it inside my glove.

Without another word, McKenzie took my arm and escorted me to the captain's quarters. Once we were inside, he closed the door and turned the key in the lock.

"There's no smelling salts, is there?" he said. "You're not the kind for it."

"Nor is this necklace mine." I removed my glove, took out the little chain, and laid it on the brown plush sofa.

I sat down, but he stood with his hands braced on the chart table. "I bought it for *her*," he said, "that day in Tacoya. If I'd known it would be the finish of her—"

He broke off for a moment, trying to recover himself. Then he began to lower the birdcages on their pulleys. The effort of concentration seemed to ease him, and he continued. "She'd never had fancies. Necklaces and such. Not even a ribbon or a bit of lace. Well, I knew how that was. My folk were the same, put on a necktie or give a shine to your boots, they called it vanity. After a time, it scours the world blank and bitter, that kind of narrowness. You have to leave it, or smother."

He fetched seed and water for the birds, stroking one of them now and then with a fingertip. At last he turned to look at me. "There was nothing shameful between Eliza and me, Miss Burge. I never laid a hand on her, I swear on my life."

Sailor or not, I believed him. "But her husband thought you had," I said.

He began to haul the cages up again by their pulleys. "I took her

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about Tacoya market a bit that day, after I called for her at the *Nancy.* She was fearful quiet, and her hand was shaking something fierce. I'd have taken her straight back to the *Star,* but she said no, she wouldn't go back there, not ever. I thought she and Logan must have quarreled, so I walked her round the stalls to give her time to calm herself. A vendor came up to us with a trayful of trinkets, and I begged her to choose what she fancied, and keep it for my sake, in case . . . Well, sailors have such notions, miss. I've no family that'll own me now, and I thought, if my time came, I should like to go under thinking it might matter to somebody."

"Did you tell her that?"

"Not in so many words. But with Eliza, you didn't always need the words."

"So she chose this chain from the tray."

"There was a bit of coral strung on it, and she was fond of the color." McKenzie drew a deep breath. "I felt—so close to her, miss. Don't know what I *might've* done. Kissed her, maybe. And then *he* turned up. Logan. Out of nowhere. Maybe he saw it in my face, how I felt for her, I don't know. But he caught sight of that coral bead at her throat, and he seized hold of her by it and pulled her up and down Tacoya docks, swearing and weeping and calling her a whore, and the chain sawing at her throat, and people staring. I tried to pull him away, but he picked up a knife from a fishmonger's stall and he gashed my arm with it."

"Did she say nothing?"

"'I am what you've made me.'"

"Nothing else?"

"Not another word. But she pulled hard away from him, and the chain broke."

"She went back to the *Star* after all. Do you think she meant to make it up with him?"

"What else could she do? Logan would've soon fetched her back, he'd the law on his side."

"Did you speak to her after that day?"

McKenzie let his eyes close, as though he could not bear to look at me, or at anything that was not Eliza. "I feared what he might do to her," he said. "I never spoke to her again."

We were both silent for a long while after that. "What is your Christian name, Mr. McKenzie?" I asked him at last.

"Andrew."

"A good name. Could Eliza have taken her own life, Andrew?"

"How can I say? Locked in here alone, with those bloody birds—She hated them, you know. Wanted me to let them go, but I told her they wouldn't survive at sea. Land birds, without big enough wings."

"Do you think Captain Logan ever loved her?"

He looked up at me. "How can you love what you don't even know?"

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"I think," I said slowly, "that sometimes, when all practical chance of it is gone, knowledge doesn't really come into it. One falls in love with the *hope* of loving."

Not for the first time, I wished I might speak to Dayton Logan. But there were practical matters still to be clarified.

"Tell me, Andrew," I said, "were you here in the cabin before me on the morning I found Eliza's body?"

"Nay," he replied, "I was above-decks with Stoddard, till Mr. Rossiter came and fetched me."

"Well, someone must have been here. I heard water running in the basin. There was no one to turn off the tap, but when I went to look, it had stopped."

"Aye, well, these taps have to be pumped up to get pressure. Primed, y'see. They shut off unless you pump 'em up again. Sometimes they shut off when they're scarce used. I tried to wash myself a bit after I went looking for that sheet to wrap her in, but the tank was empty just then, and there was no water at all."

So that was how one of his hairs had found its way onto the basin. Trying to wash off his tears so the men wouldn't notice.

"When you searched the ship for Captain Logan," I said, "who searched these quarters?"

"Nobody. He'd not been spending his nights here, and we didn't wish to disturb *her,* not till we were certain. And then when you found her—"

"What is beyond the dining parlor? Are there other compartments?"

"Stoddard's stateroom and m'own, and the steward's. The ship's kitchen and the steward's pantry."

"May I look into the pantry for a moment?" A conviction was growing upon me.

He led me through the dining parlor and into a narrow passage, from which a sliding door gave entrance to the little cubicle. Two walls were lined with wire-netted shelves of canned and packaged and bottled goods that reached from floor to ceiling. "What is kept on the top shelf?" I asked him.

"See for yourself," said McKenzie, and pulled a curtain at the far side of the room. He extracted precisely what I had been hoping for—a wooden ladder, quite long enough to reach the hook from which Eliza Logan's body had hung.

As I climbed up, my black silk skirt caught on one of the rungs, but it was worth it. On the top pantry shelf stood two bottles of good brandy. But there was space for two more.

He had needed the ladder to obtain his provisions. He had taken it from the after-cabin. Brought it back here to the pantry, where he knew it belonged. Climbed up and supplied himself with brandy.

And now, I was almost certain, Captain Dayton Logan was still somewhere aboard the *China Star,* living on brandy and

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fine Virginia ham.

When I stopped to unsnag my best gown from the slivered rung of the pantry ladder, I found caught in the splintered wood a small, three-cornered fragment of blue-flowered calico. Eliza's wrapper had caught there just as my skirt had done. But had she climbed up the ladder by choice? Or had she been carried there—drugged asleep, perhaps, or unconscious?

I put the scrap of fabric carefully away with my notes, and said nothing to Philip of it, nor of my suspicions concerning Logan. Next day at noon, we made port at Gabinea, and my cousin went off with Andrew McKenzie to inform whatever authorities they could find.

If he *was* still aboard, Logan might try to make his escape now that we were in port. But something in me doubted he would bother to attempt it. His last hope was gone. Eliza was under the sea.

Feeling almost overwhelmed by all I had seen in those last few days, I went ashore myself that morning, needing the solidity of simple earth beneath my feet—or at least the solid boards of Gabinea docks. I was fending off a seller of palm-leaf fans when I heard a little girl's voice cry out very near me.

"Bet you won't!"

"Betcher I will!" This time, a boy, somewhat older by the sound of him.

"Won't!"

"Will!"

"Won't neither! *I* will, though!"

A chubby girl of around four years, with a head of carrot-colored hair so thick she appeared to be wearing a fur hat with braids hanging from it, came dashing out from behind a pile of barrels on the dock, put a small, sticky hand into mine, walked two or three steps with me, then laughed and ran away again.

"Ma!" shouted the boy. "'Ropa's a-making advances again!"

"Europa Lavinia Thomas!" cried a woman's voice in an East London accent. "Don't you go a-rollickin' innocent gentlefolk like that! Why, the lady'll take you for a wild sawwage!"

The two children ran off after a man selling monkeys, and "Ma" came laboring down the gangplank with two smaller offspring clinging on to her skirts. She was plump and pleasant-faced, with hair of a less startling red than her children's. She laughed and dusted her floury hands on her apron, whitening a baby at either side.

"I'm that sorry, ma'am," she said. "Did she dirty yer glove? If you care to come aboard, I'm sure to have somink'll clean it."

"Oh, there's no harm done," I said, glancing down at the name of the ship on the berthing card. "I beg your pardon, but—are you Mrs. Captain Thomas?"

I had stumbled on—or been overwhelmed by—the mother hen of the *Nancy Bright*.

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"I knowed as that poor lamb would come to grief," she said, wiping her eyes. "And such a dreadful way to go. A-hangin' there as if she was some turrible willain."

We sat at tea in the after-cabin of the *Nancy.* It was a warm, cluttered room, full of hobbyhorses, one-armed dollies, alphabet blocks, darning eggs, issues of *The Ladies' Companion,* ships-in-bottles, and music books.

She followed my gaze. "Them's for the melodeon," she said. "It's somewheres under them quilt blocks." She sighed. "I do love a melodeon. Can't play it, not a scrap. But it's ever such a comfort at sea."

"Eliza seemed very fond of her spinet," I said.

"Ah, but it weren't hers, not rightly. That's how all the trouble come betwixt 'em. If I'd ever 'a thought it would end as it done—" She shuddered, and put another dollop of honey in her willowware cup. "But somebody 'ad to tell 'er. She were owed that, poor mite. No, that there pianer was Lucy's. Logan's *other* wife."

I gulped some tea and said nothing.

"That fancy bed was 'ers, too," Mrs. Thomas continued. "And the carpet. And the sewing machine. All 'ers. Had money, Lucy did. That's 'ow Logan come by his share of the *Star.*"

"How did she die?" I said.

"Didn't," she replied, and took a sip of tea.

"You mean—she was murdered?"

"Oh no, my dear. Left him. Didn't know her own mind when she married him, that's my belief. Thought sea captains was romantic, I don't doubt. 'igh-strung, Lucy were. I thank the Lord I ain't strung at all. I'm kneaded like a good penny loaf, and so's Cap'n T., and we likes it that way."

"Where is Lucy now? Do you know?"

"Lives someplace tony. Inland. Vienner, I believe. Ships don't dock at Vienner."

"But they do in Maine."

Mrs. Thomas cradled her teacup in her two hands. "Poor Eliza. Poor little mite. She never knowed Logan more'n a fortnight afore they was wed. But sixteen, she were, and a great ache in her to get out of her pa's house. Logan took her to Boston for a week, and she said he was handsome, then, with his grey whiskers and his uniform, and he didn't seem old to her at all. Well, I expect he felt young with her. And he's a decent man at heart, and *that* lonesome all these years, you wouldn't believe it. A clean start and a new life, that'll be what he wanted. But it weren't clean, were it? Couldn't be, not with Lucy still wed to 'im. I did pity him, miss. Though, mind you, he needed horsewhippin' for misleadin' that poor mite like he done, and so I told him, and Cap'n T. told him, too."

"Could he not divorce this Lucy?"

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"A lady like 'er, with an uppity fambly, as everybody knowed every whisper of? They'd keep 'im in the courts a hundred years, tryin' to get back her dowry. And he'd spent it, you see, buyin' into the *Star.*"

"So. He'd have lost his ship if they divorced. And he was locked out of all normal living. No wonder he couldn't bear to tell Eliza. He'd have lost her as well."

Mrs. T. nodded. "Thought better of it after they was wed, that's my belief. Takes her back to that sour old grinder of a father of hers, he does, and off he sails in the *Star* for a three years' voyage. Thought she'd dreamed her marriage, that's what she told me."

"So when Logan returned at last," I said, "she begged to sail with him, as you do with your husband."

"Wanted to start a fambly. Asked me how I keeps the little 'uns from flyin' outa their hammocks in rough seas. But in that museum of Lucy's—" Mrs. Thomas paused. "P'rhaps I didn't ought to say this, Miss Harriet, you bein' unmarried. But once Eliza'd shipped out with him— Well, Logan hardly touched her in the married way after they come aboard. It was Lucy's place, do you see, and everything put him in mind of 'er, I expect. Eliza come to me that day at Tacoya and wept, poor little rabbit." Great tears rolled down her own face now. "God forgive me for a meddlin' old biddy. I should never've told her the truth."

I knew I ought to reassure her, ought to mouth the conventional wisdom and tell her that knowing the truth is always best. But when the illusion of loving is all there is to save you, and all there will ever be, then truth may snap you in two like a cheap necklace. Mrs. Thomas was right. She should never have told Eliza Logan the truth.

"Were Eliza and Andrew McKenzie lovers, Mrs. Thomas?" I whispered.

"I do hope so," she said softly. "I hope to God they was."

I did not sleep that night. Just after midnight, I rose, dressed, and made my way down the corridor, past cabin after dark cabin from which fitful masculine snores could be discerned. It seemed to go on forever, that corridor, a whole cynical universe of tiny, airless boxes from which simple human connection was forever banished.

It was very dark on deck, with only a few lanterns lighted and just one sailor on watch. I made my way to the stern rail and turned to look out to sea, thinking of my father, and of what awaited me in Hong Kong. Thinking of Philip.

I did not hear the footsteps approach me. Out of nowhere, as though from the heavy, sodden air itself, a broad hand smashed itself over my mouth. "Don't cry out!" said Logan.

Though I could not see him, I knew at once who it was. I nodded my head, and his hand relaxed its pressure a little. "If I let you

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go," he said in a hoarse, grating whisper, "you must promise not to turn around."

I nodded again, and he uncovered my mouth. "Did you kill her?" I said. "Did you kill Eliza?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you."

"I killed her heart."

"But you didn't put the noose round her neck."

"No. When I came in, she was standing on the ladder with the cord around her throat."

I wanted terribly to turn and see his face, but I reached out a hand into the hot darkness instead. To my surprise, his fingertips touched mine, then grasped them hard. So we stood, awkward and equal.

"She never asked questions," he whispered. "She knew only the self that was born when I met her."

"And the other? Lucy's husband?"

"I had not seen my wife in twenty years! She was scarcely real to me anymore. And I loved Eliza so. I could not give her up."

"But you abandoned her to her family and went back to sea."

"I meant to stay away, write to her, tell her the truth. Do the decent thing. But I could not. I regretted what I had done to her. But it was a kind of death for me, being without her."

Like my father's exile to Hong Kong, I thought. Like my refusal of Philip.

"That day on Tacoya docks," Logan went on, "I knew from the moment I saw her that she had learned the truth. I said such things to her— It was nothing to do with that necklace, nor with McKenzie. I think I wanted her to be as guilty as I was. And I knew she was not. She could never be."

I let go his hand and turned to look at him. His face, in the flickering light of the stern lantern, was not at all that of a madman.

"Tell me how she died," I told him. "You must. They will ask you in Singapore."

"I will not be in Singapore," he said.

He shrugged, hunching his shoulders against the weight of his memory, and in my mind, I saw them both. Heard the wash of the sea against the hull. The battering of wakeful birds against cages.

"I dared not come too close," he began, "for her feet barely clung to the ladder. I begged her forgiveness. Told her we might yet love one another. She said nothing, only looked at me, but I saw no anger in her face. And then she—stepped away, that was all. Into the air."

It sounded two bells. From somewhere ashore, there was music and the laughter of girls who did not mind what man lay in their arms.

"I ran towards her," Logan went on, "to lift her body up. I might

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have saved her. But like a fool I tripped over a chair and fell. I was too late. Too late."

If it were Philip, I thought, if I had seen his body dangling there on that hook, what would I have done? Wept? Screamed? No. It is not my nature. I should have wanted him down from there, whatever it cost me. Wanted him once more in my arms, dead or living.

"I'm a coward," Logan said, as though he had read my mind. "Lucy knew what I was. And all cowards are selfish. When Eliza was dead, I thought of what they might do to *me*. I thought of food and drink, and where I might hide till I could make my escape. I behaved like a murderer because that is what I am. It has been in me all these years, like syphilis. Turn around, now. Go back to your cabin. Do not interfere."

He would let the sea have him, I knew that. He had been waiting all these days for me, to tell me the scrap of truth that was his story. Had he seen something in me that might understand him—a something that lived outside the cages of convention and decorum and false modesty and smothering religion?

Dayton Logan had not put Eliza into a cage. He had opened the door of the one into which she had been born and had lived all her life, and Lucy or no Lucy, they might have been happy. He had told her so. But Eliza was a cagebird, too frightened to fly.

I found myself thinking of Lucy herself, in whatever "tony" cage her uppity family had found for her. And of Philip's wife, Cornelia, too.

I did not wait to hear the slight splash Logan's body must have made as it slipped from the stern of the *China Star* into the dark, tangled waters of Gabinea docks, nor hear the cries when he was found the next morning. I did not watch as McKenzie went into the after-cabin, brought out the cages of songbirds, and let them fly away to their fate.

I left Logan behind in his darkness and went down again, into that interminable corridor of passengers' cabins. There was a dim light under one door, and I knocked softly. "Philip?" I said. "Are you awake?"

I heard his footsteps, and in a moment the door opened. "Why, Harriet," he said gently. "You've been crying. You never cry."

"Does Cornelia love you, Philip? Is she glad to be your wife?"

He did not flinch. "Not mine in particular. It's a game she could play with anyone. Less boring than whist. But only just."

I laid my palm upon his tired face. "Back in Devon, I was afraid of myself," I said, "and all cowards are selfish. I am braver now. Let me in." ●

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The Brick

by Natasha Cooper

Natasha Cooper's series starring British barrister Trish Maguire has proved popular on both sides of the Atlantic. St. Martin's Press published the seventh novel, *Gagged and Bound,* last September, with another expected later this year. Ms. Cooper's second story for us is a non-series tale that harks back to her days as an editor in London. ¶

It all started with the broken window. That was what was so infuriating. If those wretched children hadn't found the brick next-door's cowboy builders had left in the front garden and thought it would be fun to smash a big bit of clean glass, none of it would have happened. We'd still have been okay; not in seventh heaven or anything extravagant like that, but okay.

The randomness of it still makes me swear. It needn't have happened; none of it. That's what gets to me when I let myself think about it.

There I was peacefully sitting on a beanbag on the floor (we'd sanded the boards by then but not varnished them and they looked a bit splintery; but they were clean, which was something after the state we'd found them in when we tore up the old lino) reading short stories for a contest. They were all about spouses killing each other, of course: short stories for contests nearly always are. And I'd been congratulating myself rather because however livid I'd been with John, I'd never, even in my wildest, most secret fantasies, wanted to kill him. Stiffen him, maybe; tell him not to be such a baby and to get on out there and do his bit of the bargain, like I'd always done mine. I mean, I'd given up my job when it was clear that he needed more input than I'd been able to give him while I was working so hard.

It wasn't only the comfort and the listening and the putting up with stress-induced sulks, you see; he'd needed a lot more practical help with all sorts of things, and meals suddenly became important to him in a way they'd never been before. We'd always just picked for supper whenever we both got back from work, but suddenly he wanted three courses with both of us sitting down at the table, whenever he got back. And my publishing salary just wasn't up to paying a housekeeper, not after tax and all the things I'd had to pay for—you know, decent clothes and that sort of thing. So I'd given up. I'd always done a bit of freelance, luckily, as it turned

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out. So when John cracked up, I still had all my contacts in place.

Anyway, where was I? Being on my own all day means that I do get very short of chat, which is why I can't stop talking when there's any opportunity. Sorry about that. I've lost my drift. Oh, yes, the brick. Well, you see, there I was, sitting by the window, thinking that at least this titchy little South London cottage was a bit lighter than our Kensington house, when this bloody brick crashed through the window and landed by my feet. It must have been in next-door's garden for a while because it was coated with mud and had wood lice clinging to it. You know, those prehistoric-looking horrid little black things.

They were all over the house when we bought it, but once we'd sorted the damp we got rid of most of them. They crunch under your bare feet. In a way that was nearly the worst thing, getting out of bed that first morning in the new house and hearing the crunch under my feet. I could have hit John then. I wouldn't have, honestly, and I never told him that's how I felt, but it was the last straw.

He was lying there with most of the pillow over his head, not getting up, hating the potty little job that was all he'd managed to get. I know he was feeling awful. And I did sympathise. I really did. You couldn't not if you loved him, and I did. But I wished he'd just pull himself together a bit. I mean, the rest of us had to. Anyway, the brick. Well, it wasn't so much the brick as the bits of glass. One of the bigger splinters sliced through my forearm, you know, the one bit of one that stays looking reasonably firm even when the rest begins to go scraggy. It was such a shock. I was still reeling from the noise. You can't imagine how much noise one of those plate-glass windows makes when it's broken. And then there was a kind of stinging down my arm; that's all it seemed to be at the beginning, a sting. And I looked down and there was this great long red line, getting redder and wider all the time. Spreading. It was about six inches long, I think, and the lips of it opened as I looked, like a cut in a bit of steak.

Anyway, for a while I just sat and looked at it. Then when the blood started dripping down onto the beanbag—it was natural canvas, so it showed—and the planks we'd spent so long sanding, I knew I'd have to do something. It was hurting by then, too. And I felt like a child. Perhaps that was why I let her in. I felt wobbly and pathetic, nothing like Penny-who's-such-a-brick, Penny who's always kept everything going even when her husband cracked up like that and both the children went so peculiar.

She rang the bell just as I'd got to the hall, gripping the sides of the cut with my other hand. Well, it would have to be the other hand, wouldn't it? Honestly, sometimes I forget I've ever been a copyeditor. Where was I? I know, trying not to think too much about her. She'd have said I was in denial and she'd have been right. I sort of thought it must be whoever'd chucked the brick

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through the window who was ringing the bell and I wasn't going to answer. I was leaning against the hall wall—we hadn't painted that yet, just stripped off the awful old spriggy paper we'd found when we came—and feeling faint, really. Anyone would have. And then she called out:

"Are you all right? I saw them throw it and tried to catch them, but I was just too far away."

She did sound breathless, as though she'd been running. And she had a nice voice, rich and deepish, and very warm. It sounded so safe and sure that I came over even more wobbly than before, which was barmy. Children always do it if you're too sympathetic when they've bumped themselves, but I was old enough to know better.

"Hello? Are you all right? My name's Sophie Allen. I live just round the corner. I'm perfectly respectable. Can I come in? Give you a hand? There's a very good glazier I know who does our windows whenever we're burgled. I can give him a ring for you, if you'd like. Are you there?"

So then I stammered out something idiotic and opened the door. And there she was, just about my age but much younger looking. She wasn't having to hold down all that fury, for one thing. Or not by then. I found out later that she'd been through the same sort of thing in a way, but she'd got over it. People do. Or so they say.

"You poor thing," was all she said. But she came right in, put an arm round my shoulders, and nearly pushed me towards the kitchen. I'd hated that, too, being able to see into the kitchen from the front door. It really drove the downshifting bit home.

She knew all about the house because hers was exactly the same. They all are in those little streets between the commons. She had my arm under the cold tap in seconds. The firmness of her was lovely then, just as safe-making as her voice. The brick and the malice of it were washed off just like the blood. They came back. But for a bit they'd gone. She kept on talking and I didn't really listen to the words, just the sureness of her voice.

It sounded as though she knew everything that mattered and would always help but never ask the sort of questions you didn't want to answer. She always did see a lot, and she knew what you could take and what you needed—and offered it straight off. Always.

When she'd got me bloodless and dried out and bandaged up, she called the glazier she knew and swept up the glass, found the Hoover and sucked up the splinters from the beanbag, too, and even Hoovered my jeans. I wouldn't have thought of that, but she was right; there were chips of glass caught in some of the seams. I saw them gleaming as she sucked. It was a weird sensation, that powerful pull all down my thighs and her lovely, warm, matter-of-fact voice, telling me what she was doing and why and what the shock of it all was doing to me, and why I was feeling so awful, and who she thought the children were who'd thrown the brick and how

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it wasn't me they were throwing it at but the old bat who'd lived there before us. She'd been a bit of a witch, apparently, always complaining about ordinary noise and making a great fuss about children playing in the street. They still do that round here. I couldn't believe it at first: roller-blading in the middle of the road, chucking balls about. As though they weren't ten minutes' walk from two huge open spaces. And they always did make a bit of a row. I saw what she meant: the old bat, I mean, who in a way caused the trouble because if she hadn't upset them in the first place, they wouldn't have chucked the brick and none of the rest of it would've happened.

"But there's a SOLD sign outside," I said at the time. I remember that. It was nearly the first thing I'd said in the torrent of all the comfort she'd poured out. I'd meant to say something about how amazing it was to find a friendly neighbour in a place where I'd never expected to, but all that came out was that peevish little protest. "Can't they read?"

"Probably not. Lots of the more delinquent ones can't. I'm a woodentop, and I see a fair amount of children like them."

"A woodentop?" I thought I hadn't heard properly, but she smiled, a great huge smile that showed off her perfect white teeth. Mine aren't like that: crossed over at the front and a nasty grubby colour like stale clotted cream. Ugh.

"Magistrate," she said, laughing. She had a lovely laugh, too, and none of us had laughed for ages, not happily like that. "No one calls us that these days, but in the old days they did and I like it. Now, you're glass-free. You'd better have something hot. Tea? Coffee? God! I sound like an air hostess, don't I? Shall I put the kettle on?"

And so she made herself at home. I liked it, which I'd never have let myself do if it hadn't been for the brick and the blood. I sat on the beanbag, looking at the jagged great hole in the window, and thought about the violence of South London and how much I hated it and how scared I was even though I couldn't afford to be. They say it's changed now, but in those days it was pretty rough. So there I was, thinking how amazing it was that she was there, and perhaps even in South London there would be people to meet and like and talk to. Damn! I'm forgetting the copyediting again. But I can't stop once I've started. Sorry. I don't often talk as much as this. Well, I do, actually, but it feels new each time I do it and I always mean not to afterwards.

There was one little bit of glass she'd missed. Even she'd managed to miss one and it lay on the scrubbed board just near a stickying puddle of my blood, glinting. It was a sunny day. All the days that summer were sunny. It seemed unfair in a way.

She came back with the tea, very strong tea-bag tea. It tasted like her, strong and warm and helping. Then we just talked. She was still there when the woman who was doing the school run to the local comprehensive dropped my two off and she stayed to tea

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and made them laugh and helped with their homework. Then she went, giving me her number and telling me she'd drop in again. She only lived round the corner.

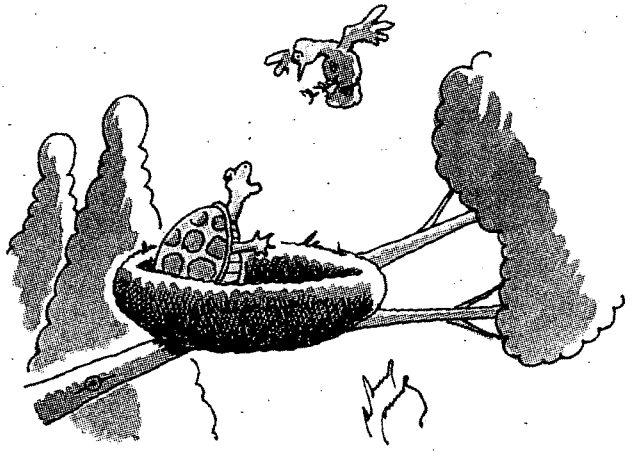
It wasn't for weeks that I got round to asking her for supper so that John could share in it all. I suppose in a way I'd wanted to keep her as my treat. But then it seemed selfish, so I fixed it so that he could meet her, too.

When he took one look at her and said, "Sophie?" in that surprised but blissful voice, I suppose I knew what was going to happen. I was angry with her for not telling me she knew him, but when I looked at her I saw that she was just as surprised as he'd been. She knew my married name, of course, but I never talked about John because it would have been disloyal and so she'd never made the connection; she'd been married, too, for about ten years, and so he hadn't recognised her name when I'd talked about her.

That was it, really. They tried not to, I think. They really did try, but she was just so much better at making him feel all right than I was. I understood that. She did it for me, too, when he could only make me feel miles worse. In a way it wasn't what they did that made me so angry. It was what he said when he'd made his decision, as though I'd be pleased to hear it, as though he was giving me something again after all.

"If it wasn't for everything you've taught me I'd never have been able to love Sophie as she deserves. I couldn't do it when I first knew her because I didn't know enough. It was you who taught me how to know people and let them know me. It's all your doing, Penny. You've shown me how to be all the things she wanted me to be then and I couldn't. We owe it all to you and we'll never forget it."

I won't either. Not ever. You see, that was when I *did* want to kill him. But even then, if I hadn't been jointing the chickens when he said it and had a sharp knife in my hands, we'd still have been all right. I know we would. ●



"Sorry, regime change."

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KARAOKE NIGHT

by David Knadler

A 2003 Department of First Stories author, David Knadler continues to write intelligent fiction, full of keen observations and with evocative settings. This is his third story for us, in a series in which crimes are solved not through the use of science but through the detective's insights into character. ¶

The body was just inside the bar, surrounded by a puddle of blood and beer. Four guys were thoughtfully regarding the dead man in the same stance they might take around the open hood of somebody's new pickup: one hand in a jeans pocket, the other holding a drink.

"About time," George Wick said. "Christ, I'm surprised they ain't had the funeral yet."

"Yeah? I'm surprised you're not going through his pockets yet. Get back. Ever hear of a crime scene?"

Deputy Sheriff John Ennis stepped gingerly in next to the body. The bloodstain was huge, black in the bar light, blooming across the right half of Dean Jackman's snap-button shirt, merging the vertical stripes. Jackman himself stared at the ceiling, looking slightly amazed at the way the evening had turned out. Ennis could have pronounced the big realtor dead from twenty feet away, but he checked for a pulse.

"Sandy already tried CPR," Wick said. "I think he was dead when he hit the floor."

Sandy West, the barmaid, was seated behind him on a barstool, rubbing at her hands with a stained handkerchief. She had been crying. The knees of her jeans were wet, and there was blood on her blouse.

Ennis leaned in and examined the bullet wound: big slug, a few inches below the left armpit. The bullet had come through the Cadillac's door. Couldn't have struck the heart directly or Jackman wouldn't have made it in from the parking lot, but the bullet had definitely torn through something vital. Ennis was slightly relieved. He'd been caught on the wrong side of a Montana Rail Link freight train when the call came and it was probably better that the five-minute delay would not have made the difference between life and death.

There was a chiming sound, which resolved itself into a tune Ennis recognized as the opening bars to "La Bamba." Startled, he looked around, then realized it was coming from the little phone

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clipped to the dead man's tooled leather belt. He looked at Wick and his friends, who were looking back at him. Two more rings. He reached for the phone, but by then it had gone silent. Ennis flipped it open and made a note of the local number.

He stood, keyed his shoulder mike: "No hurry on the ambulance, Debbie. 10-55. Call Libby; coroner and crime scene."

Wick and company had repaired to the bar to refill their glasses from a new pitcher of beer. Ennis stared at them.

"George? What I said about the crime scene? The bar is closed. Now what happened?"

Wick scowled, tilted his glass toward the body. "Only thing we saw was this dipshit diving onto our table."

Ennis had his notebook out. "He say anything?"

Wick nodded. "Music was pretty loud, but it sounded like, 'Bitch shot me.' Then he kind of twisted to one side and knocked over my table. Two pitchers gone. Pissed me off. I was going to kick his ass, but then . . ."

"He said 'bitch'? Who do you think he meant by that?"

Wick smirked. "Well, he's been boinking Alana Winnett."

"Works at Ace Hardware?"

"Used to. Heard she got her real-estate license." Wick nodded at the dead man. "Went to work for Dean. Seen 'em in here a couple times."

"She's married, right?"

"Yep. So's Dean. That ain't considered a big obstacle to romance in these parts."

Wick and his friends chuckled at that, but their smiles faded in the presence of Jackman's cooling corpse. Maybe they were remembering they were married, too.

Ennis contemplated the body. He knew Dean Jackman only slightly, just as he knew Alana Winnett and most everybody else in Worland: enough to greet them by name with a nod or a smile, enough to share casual observations about the weather. This was a change from Philadelphia, where he'd worked as a beat cop for a few years before moving West. There most of the victims had been anonymous. Which was a good thing, he now knew. It was somewhat harder to deal with a shattered life when you had a recent picture of that same life whole.

Dean Jackman had a wife, Mary Ann, who sat on the school board, and a teenage daughter who had graduated high school last year at the top of her class. Alana Winnett had a husband, Roy, who was currently unemployed, and a couple of kids still in school: a little blond girl of eight or nine, and a boy who must be fifteen now—small for his age, but he'd already come to the attention of the authorities, as Ennis liked to put it.

"You see Alana around here tonight? Roy? Mary Ann?"

All four shook their heads, but again it was Wick who spoke.

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"Nah. Last couple weeks, they been in here. Karaoke night. Jackman and Alana, coming in at different times, trying to make like they're just running into each other, but you know how that goes. He'd actually get up and try to sing Springsteen, 'Dancing in the Dark.' Didn't see 'em tonight."

Ennis closed his notebook. Outside, the keys were still in Jackman's Escalade, and it was not unthinkable that at ten-thirty on a karaoke night somebody out there might now be drunk enough to take it for a spin. He shepherded Wick and friends out the door and keyed the mike as he stood in the doorway. "Where's Twenty-nine?"

Twenty-nine was Kevin Heibein, the fresh-faced Worland city cop who looked as if he should be starting his sophomore year at Kootenai High. He was supposed to have been here by now.

"Twenty-nine has a hit-and-run," Debbie answered. "Half-mile west on Gypsy Lake Road. One injured. I sent the ambulance there instead. Can you manage by yourself?"

Ennis guessed he'd have to. It would take the county help at least another half-hour to get here and there were no other officers in the greater Worland area.

A chill wind had come up, but the bar crowd was still milling around in the parking lot, chatting and laughing as though they were out there for a fire drill instead of a homicide. Despite Ennis's earlier admonition, some of them were also edging closer to the Escalade: He recognized Ray Esposito and a few of his skateboard buddies, who had reached legal drinking age this year and were making the most of it. They backed away at the sound of his police radio, trying to appear casual about it. Ennis gave them a hard look.

"Nobody picked up any brass, right? Anybody see what happened?" Getting shrugs, he walked around the SUV, studying the gravel. If there had ever been evidence here, it was ruined now. He examined the bullet hole on the driver's side. It had punched through below the window, which had been rolled down. He could picture Jackman sitting in his SUV, his elbow up on the sill. Talking to someone. Which would explain why the slug hadn't hit his left arm. There was another bullet hole on the far side of the cab, just above the window on the passenger side. This shot had come through the open driver's window, he guessed, maybe meant for Jackman's head. The rising angle meant the shooter was probably a bit lower than his victim. Maybe somebody sitting in a car?

No shell casings, so the weapon was probably a revolver. Big bullet holes, so it was a large caliber—in short, the sort of weapon occupying nightstand drawers in about half the households in Worland. There wasn't a lot of violent crime in the town, but people around here liked to be ready for anything.

"Looks like he got hit out here, you know, then went inside." This deduction came from Esposito, who had again approached and was now standing behind Ennis. Like everybody else, he was still

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holding his drink. Icehouse, Ennis noted: Twice the alcohol so you could get drunk in half the time. In Ray's circle, this was considered a significant bargain. It was maybe 35 degrees out and the kid was wearing enormous cargo shorts riding just above his crotch. Like his friends, he wore his cap backward.

"Very shrewd, Ray. You notice this before you walked through the trail of blood, or after?"

The kid's face fell.

"I told 'em not to walk in it," he said. "Just trying to help."

"Yeah, thanks. You see who did it?"

He shook his head. "No, man . . . but I did kind of hear it."

"Heard what?"

Ray lifted his bottle, tilted it toward the far corner of Westy's, beyond the illumination of the bar signs.

"I was over there, taking a piss."

"And?"

He seemed embarrassed. "Would have used the can, but it gets rank in there. There was a line, and I had to go, you know?"

"Right, Ray. What did you hear?"

"Heard the shots, man. Two of 'em, real loud."

"You didn't have a look?"

He shrugged. "I'm taking a leak, man. Anyway, I thought it was firecrackers."

Everybody always thought gunshots were firecrackers, Ennis thought. And vice versa. Funny how that worked.

"Anything else?"

"Just people talking. Somebody laughed. Then, *pop, pop.*"

"Jackman was talking to someone? Man or woman?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Coulda been a woman. Didn't sound like anybody was mad or scared or anything. Like I said, he laughed. That's why I thought it was firecrackers."

"What were they saying?"

Ray thought about it, shook his head. "I dunno. Just voices."

"What about after? See a car leave?"

Ray studied the ground, perhaps now regretting coming forward.

"No, no car. I woulda seen that."

The undersheriff from Libby was a guy Ennis knew only from anecdotes: Brian Hallstrom, who would also be acting as coroner tonight. He'd only been with the department a couple of months. Word was, he had been a hotshot homicide detective in San Diego. Then, like so many of Montana's newer residents, he had sold his overpriced bungalow in California and used the proceeds to buy a twenty-acre ranchette here in Big Sky country, five-bedroom log home, outbuildings, and everything. Now he was living the dream, hunting and fly-fishing, and occasionally showing up for work at the Kootenai County Sheriff's Department. His pay would be a

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quarter of what he'd made in San Diego, Ennis guessed, but then the same thing could be said of the job stress.

Hallstrom strode in, followed by two deputies whose eyes widened when they beheld the dead man on the floor. Both in their twenties; they could well be encountering their first homicide. Hallstrom was arrayed in fringed buckskin jacket, big tan Stetson tilted back on his head, long blond hair flowing back past the collar of a sky-blue snap-button shirt. Ennis stared: The look was one part Ralph Lauren, two parts George Armstrong Custer—it was probably just an oversight that Hallstrom did not have a pearl-handled revolver strapped to each hip. He also sported a little gold neck chain and deep, even tan. Ennis knew of only one way to stay that brown this late in October, and it wasn't through honest toil on a riverside ranchette.

"Nice job securing the crime scene here, deputy," Hallstrom said. He was chewing gum, surveying the room without appearing to move his head. "What, you sell tickets or something? Half the town out there, every one of 'em probably got blood on their goddamned shoes. Jesus."

"Karaoke night," Ennis said. "Everybody was here when it happened, and I'm only one guy."

Hallstrom shook his head.

"Bunch of hayseeds."

Ennis opened his mouth, closed it, suppressed an urge to shoot the guy. Instead he reached out to touch the fringe of Hallstrom's jacket. "Is that real leather?"

Ennis was out by the Escalade, getting useless statements from a few more of the dwindling crowd of karaoke patrons, when his radio crackled again. "Man with a gun at Last Chance Bar. Subject is very 10-51, threatening to kill somebody. Bartender requests an officer."

It was turning into quite the festive evening. One of the Libby uniforms, Janet Salisbury, was listening. "Gun? You want me to go with you?"

Hallstrom had emerged from the bar and was talking to Wick and his friends. The other deputy had been following him around with a Nikon digital camera and was still taking pictures of everything in sight, now including a couple of laughing girls who pantomimed lifting up their tops.

Salisbury spoke with Hallstrom, who waved her off. "Go on, I'll finish up here. If we ever get a goddamned ambulance here, I'm gonna call it a night."

The Last Chance Bar was seven miles north, right up against the border station. There were only two vehicles in the parking lot when Ennis and Salisbury drove up. Their headlights illuminated a short, stocky woman leaning against a battered Toyota pickup, smoking a cigarette. She lifted a hand in greeting.

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"He still here?" Ennis said.

She shrugged. "Yeah, but I haven't heard anything for a while. Surprised you guys showed up, tell you the truth. Couple weeks ago I had this Canuck, went crazy and started punching the keno machines. Just beating the hell out of them. I called and couldn't get nobody out here then."

Janell Rector was a little shy of five feet, had short brown hair and biceps that would shame a good share of the mill workers in town. If she was nervous about the guy inside with the gun, she didn't look it. Ennis knew she had once flattened a logger twice her size with an aluminum softball bat she kept behind the bar. He hadn't heard about the crazy Canadian, but he felt a flash of sympathy for the guy.

He nodded at the door. "So who is it?"

"The gunslinger? One of the Winnett brothers. Roy."

Ennis blinked. "Married to Alana?"

Janell gave him a thin smile. "You heard, too, huh? Don't know how much longer that's gonna last, though. Doesn't sound like reconciliation is in the cards. He said something about shooting her."

"When did he get here?"

She didn't have to think about it. "Right at ten." She looked at her watch. "He's been here an hour, but didn't haul out his pistol until just a little bit ago. Knew I should have cut him off of that whiskey."

Ennis rubbed his chin. He'd gotten the call to Westy's at ten-thirty, which couldn't have been more than five minutes after the shooting. "He came in at ten? You sure? Had to have been a little later."

She shook her head. "Nope. I watch *Law & Order* and it comes on at ten. It was just starting when Roy came in. It was one I hadn't seen, too."

"Janell, I think Roy shot a guy at Westy's, couldn't have been earlier than ten-fifteen. So you've gotta be wrong."

Her eyes widened. "Shot a guy? Who? Don't tell me . . . "

He nodded. "Dean Jackman. I got the call right after. . . . "

Her brow furrowed as she took a drag on the cigarette. "Ten-fifteen? Couldn't have been Roy, then. I told you: He was here before that and he's been here since. Or, those numb-nuts at Westy's took their time making the call."

The folks at Westy's had conflicted about a lot of things, but all agreed that the bartender had called 911 right after the shooting, and Ennis was in no doubt about when he'd heard from dispatch.

"Anyway," Janell said, "you gonna go in and get him, or should I just call it a shift?"

Ennis surveyed the bar. Approaching drunken men with guns was one of his least favorite parts of the job, particularly if they'd already shot someone. Janet Salisbury cleared her throat, hitching up her gunbelt.

"We could call for backup."

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"We could," he said. He pictured Hallstrom out here in his cowboy suit, the other green deputy with his camera. "Let's see what the situation is."

Ennis walked back out to the rear of the parking lot and around its perimeter, trying to get a look inside the tavern from a safe distance. He stopped and waved Salisbury over.

Janell had been good enough to prop the bar door open. From here, Ennis could see the guy slumped on his stool, head on the bar. Roy Winnett was a small man, balding, his worn plaid shirt untucked. He wore faded jeans and what appeared to be a pair of buckskin slippers, the kind you'd slip on to get the newspaper. On the bar next to him: a handgun the size of a leaf-blower and a half-full bottle of Bushmill's, both within easy reach.

"Well, let's gauge his mood," Ennis said at last. "Get over behind the cruiser." When Salisbury was in place, he yelled.

"Hey, Roy! Roy Winnett!"

The figure on the barstool didn't stir.

"Roy, you awake?"

Nothing. Ennis worried briefly that the man had killed himself, but Janell would have heard the shot. He unholstered his Glock and carefully approached the open door. He positioned himself to one side and leaned over for a look. Like every bar in Montana, this one was half filled with electronic keno and poker machines, relentlessly replaying their calliope fanfares to the empty bar. Ennis understood why the Canadian might have wanted to punch them.

"Hey, Roy," he called softly. "You doing okay, partner?"

Still no sign of movement. The pistol on the bar was a real cannon; from here, Ennis was pretty sure it was a Desert Eagle with a ten-inch barrel. Probably either .357 or .44 magnum, in either case perfectly capable of penetrating any exterior wall of this cheaply built tavern—not to mention the driver's door of a Cadillac Escalade. He signaled Salisbury to come up, then took a deep breath and stepped forward as quickly and quietly as he could. He reached the gun and slid it down the bar. When it was safely out of reach he bent to smell the muzzle: nothing but Hoppes gun oil. It didn't have the acrid aroma of having been fired recently—but that was no proof it hadn't been. He released the magazine: eight fat .44-magnum bullets, full capacity for this weapon.

He touched Winnett on the shoulder and was rewarded with a loud groan.

Salisbury was at the door, looking as relieved as Ennis felt.

"Passed out, huh?"

"We timed that right," Ennis said. "Help me get him to the car."

"Well, that didn't take long," Hallstrom was saying. He had his hands on his hips again, regarding the insensate Roy Winnett, who was sprawled across the bunk in the first of the Worland Police Depart-

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ment's two holding cells. "About what I figured: This Jackman guy is porking his wife, so old Roy here does a Raccoon Racoon on his rival."

Ennis winced at this not-quite-apt reference to the Beatles tune.

Hallstrom winked, jingling his car keys. "Gotta love a small town. Get those statements typed up and fax 'em to me tomorrow. We'll take the pistolero here back to Libby with us, get him arraigned when he's sobered up. I'm heading home."

"Couple problems," Ennis said.

"What?"

"Barmaid says Roy showed up at the Last Chance a few minutes before Jackman got shot at Westy's. She's quite sure of the time. And that Desert Eagle: I don't think it's been fired tonight. We should probably check it out." He nodded at Winnett. "Him, too."

Hallstrom gave him a wintry smile. "That right? You got any other clues?"

Ennis shrugged. "Just saying: Sober witness puts him someplace else when Jackman was getting shot. Also, no brass at the scene, on him, or in his truck; if he got rid of it that's pretty careful behavior for an intoxicated man."

"Uh, Deputy," Hallstrom's eyes shifted to read the nameplate. "Ennis? You watch a lot of *Matlock* or something? Work as many of these pissant bar shootings as I have and you'll realize there's not a lot of mystery to puzzle out. Everything else adds up, so your barmaid is full of shit. Hell, if I had a dime for every witness got the time wrong."

Hallstrom jerked his thumb toward the cell. "This asshole had a great reason to kill the guy. He was drunk enough to do it, he was carrying a gun big enough to do it, and he was in the vicinity to do it. Finally, our victim is sporting a .44 wound if ever I've seen one. And I have. We match the slug, that'll cinch it. So, I think I'll go ahead and pursue this avenue of investigation. That work for you?"

Ennis smiled.

"Your call. But if the barmaid is right about the time, Roy here couldn't have killed Jackman. No mystery about that, either."

Hallstrom shook his head, looked at his watch. "Yeah, well, thanks for the tip, Sherlock. I'm taking off. Winnett's our guy. Maybe you ought to get out to this Jackman's place, let his wife know her husband's dead."

Ennis had delivered such news before, and he supposed Mary Ann Jackman took it as well as could be expected. Now she was hunched forward on the sofa, her velour bathrobe clutched around her, turning her wedding ring on her hand and staring at what appeared to be a very expensive Navajo rug. She said nothing as Ennis recounted the basic details of the shooting. He stood hat in hand, regarding the spacious interior of the Jackman living room.

Dean Jackman might have been unlucky in love at the end, but

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he had done pretty well in real estate. His sprawling log home occupied a twenty-acre hillside east of town, accessible from the gravel county road by a newly paved driveway about a quarter-mile long. The home itself must have been 6,000 square feet. It still smelled new. Inside, it was all adobe and knotty pine; every painting on the wall had an elk or an Indian in it. No doubt the undersheriff, Hallstrom, would be right at home here. Flanking a big Frederick Remington print over the stone fireplace was a crossed pair of branding irons on one side and an antique gun belt with what looked to be a pair of Colt Peacemakers occupying the holsters—he hoped they were nonfunctioning replicas. There was even an old saddle on a stand in the corner. Right next to the enormous plasma TV.

Mary Ann Jackman cleared her throat. Ennis saw her jaw muscles working. Still no tears. "At this bar," she said. "Was he alone? Was he . . . with anybody?"

She was the same age as her husband, Ennis guessed; he knew they had moved here maybe a dozen years ago from Chicago, where Dean had been an accountant of some sort. They'd been pretty well-off then and were really well-off now. Dean had opened his Shining Mountains brokerage just in time to catch a decade-long boom in Montana real estate: retirees and telecommuters and third-tier celebrities seeking a respite from urban cares, the sort of people who could remain aloof from the vagaries of a logging-based economy and didn't mind paying top dollar for the space and the scenery.

There were some old photos on a table behind the leather sofa. One of them showed Dean and Mary Ann in formal regalia, each wearing a ridiculous crown: prom royalty, he supposed. They'd changed some since then. Mary Ann was blond now, and both had put on some weight.

"I don't know," he said. "There were no witnesses to the actual shooting. We did make an arrest, but we can't be sure. . . ."

"Who?"

"Did your husband know Roy Winnett? Any reason he'd have a grudge against Dean?"

Ennis knew the answer to this, but he thought it might be good to get her reaction. Her voice was flat. "His wife. Alana. She just started working at Dean's brokerage."

She closed her eyes, then abruptly rose and began to walk around the room, her right fist clenched. "Okay, yes, I've heard things. Small-town gossip . . . people love to talk, there's nothing else for them to do. But I told Dean, I told him: You make damned sure there's nothing to this. Goddamned sure, or I'll . . ."

She stopped by the pair of antique six-shooters; Ennis had an alarming vision of her grabbing one and emptying it into him before turning it on herself.

"Her and her bubba husband: stupid white trash, the worst

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kind, this town is full of them. She's a checkout girl and he doesn't even have a job. Now look at what's happened. My husband, he was trying to make something of this town, trying to help people. Now he's dead. That bitch. This is her fault."

Ennis noticed another photo as he was turning to go: Mary Ann in hunter's orange, gripping the antlers of a dead buck. It was a winter day, and her cheeks were flushed with the thrill of the hunt. A rifle was slung on her back. It seemed Mary Ann had fully embraced the Montana lifestyle. The deer's tongue lolled out as though it never knew what hit it.

The Winnetts' estate was a little less imposing than the Jackmans': a doublewide and a carport at the end of a steep gravel driveway about a mile on the other side of town—and the other side of the tracks. An older Ford Taurus occupied the rutted driveway. A little girl's bike, pink with streamers from the handlebars, leaned against the unfinished deck. Alana Winnett appeared in the doorway when he drove up. She was holding a cigarette and a glass of white wine, and the way she leaned against the doorjamb suggested it was not her first drink of the evening.

"Oh Lord, the law," she said. "It's Roy, isn't it? Tell me he didn't do something stupid."

Ennis knew her from when she worked the checkout at Ace Hardware. She had a sleepy smile and her husky voice carried the trace of a Southern accent. Someone said she had moved here from South Carolina as a teenager. Probably quite pretty then and not exactly plain-looking now, even without the benefit of makeup. Her dark brown hair, bound tightly in a ponytail, betrayed a wisp or two of gray. Some lines were visible at the corners of her large brown eyes, and others had begun to radiate faintly around her lips—he could imagine her looking at those lines each morning and calculating the cost of Botox against a single income. She was dressed for comfort much as her husband had been: the same plaid flannel shirt and faded jeans, even down to the leather slippers. He wondered if those slippers had been gifts to each other, his and hers, exchanged with a kiss on some Christmas morning before all the reasons for being married had begun to drain out of their lives.

"I had to arrest him tonight."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh God, that idiot. I was afraid of that. We had a fight; he left here like a bat out of hell. He didn't hurt anybody, right? He's okay?"

"He's okay," Ennis said.

"And he didn't hurt anybody?"

"There was a shooting, a homicide. Do you know Dean Jackman?"

Her mouth opened, but she didn't say anything. Just nodded, staring. Finally she asked, "Is Dean all right?"

"Dean's dead. We picked up Roy not too long after. He had a gun."

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Alana Winnett turned away. Her hand brushed the door; the wineglass slipped from her hand and shattered on the threshold. She put her hands to her face. Ennis stepped around the glass and followed her into the cluttered living room. It smelled of dust and cigarettes. She looked around, as if finding herself surrounded by the worn furniture and dingy tan carpet for the first time. The little TV was going, *The Daily Show.* Jon Stewart was in good form tonight, and the audience laughter went on and on.

"You mind if I turn this off?" Without waiting for an answer, Ennis did so. He looked at her and waited.

Alana's hands trembled as she shook a cigarette from the pack of Virginia Slims on the coffee table and lit one. When she spoke, it was with difficulty. "What happened?"

He gave her the short version. At the mention of Westy's Tavern, she shook her head.

"Oh no. That stupid—Roy's not a fighter. He was drunk but I never thought he'd have the guts to . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Did he have a reason to shoot Dean Jackman?"

She looked at her hands. "No. Dean and I are friends. Just friends, really. Roy got this idea something was going on, and he just wouldn't shut up about it."

"Roy own a handgun?"

She gave a bitter laugh, waved her hand at the glass-fronted gun case next to the TV. "He has two pistols. And some rifles." She pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "He likes guns. No paycheck for six months, no job, but he'd rather starve than sell those guns. We fought about it. You know he paid a thousand dollars for one of those pistols? That was right before he got laid off at the mill."

Ennis checked the gun case, found it unlocked. A couple of .22s, a Winchester .30-30, and a scoped bolt-action Remington. The two leather holsters were both empty.

"When he left here, did he say he was going after Dean Jackman?"

She swallowed hard and shook her head. "He didn't say that. He said other things, horrible things. In front of the kids."

"Did you let Dean know?"

She nodded. "I called him on his cell phone, told him Roy was on the warpath. . . ."

There was a phone beside the sofa; Ennis saw the number was the same one he had noticed on Jackman's cell phone.

"What time was that?"

"I don't know, around ten. He was just pulling into Westy's when I called. We had talked about meeting there. He wanted to talk about a listing I'm working on. That's all. Anyway, when Roy stormed out of here he took my keys, so I called Dean to let him know."

"A business meeting? Westy's on karaoke night?"

Her mouth tightened, the lines a bit more visible now.

"We both like music, okay? Where else were we going to meet?

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They don't have a Starbucks in this town."

"You called at ten, exactly?"

She stabbed out her cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. "Maybe a little after, I don't remember. He said not to worry, he was going to . . . he was going to come out here. Then I called back to tell him not to and there was no answer."

Ennis decided not to mention that Jackman was staring at the bar ceiling by then, but she caught his look. Her hands went to her face. "Oh God."

"What time did Roy leave here?"

She rubbed her face. "I don't know; I got home at seven or so and he was already into the whiskey. He was supposed to go hunting with his brothers for the week, but for some reason he didn't. He was so drunk; I've never seen him like that. The kids were here and he just started in on me, accusing me of things. Just wouldn't quit. I tried to take the kids and leave, but he grabbed my keys and wouldn't give them back. He must have left about nine."

Her voice cracked and she stabbed out the cigarette.

"I hated for the kids to see that. He was shouting, swearing. Poor little Andrea . . . and Richie wouldn't help, wouldn't do anything. I screamed at him to call the cops but he wouldn't. He's passive, like his dad. When Roy drove off he went into his room and hasn't been out. He won't talk about it."

Alana picked up the remote control on the coffee table, touched the On button, then touched it off again. She turned it over in her hands, shaking her head. "First time in our marriage Roy decides to do something, be proactive, he kills a good man. A fine, funny man. Dean laughed at everything. He was just so positive. So cheerful."

She sobbed and turned away, fumbling for a Kleenex in the coffee-table clutter. *Proactive,* Ennis thought. *Positive.* The sort of words they'd drum into you in a real-estate marketing seminar.

"Roy's never been there as a father," Alana said. "He buys them new bikes we can't afford, takes them fishing once in a while, he thinks that's all he has to do."

Her eyes glittered when she looked at him again. "He's never been there as a husband, either."

It was after midnight when Ennis left the Winnett residence. Still hours left in the shift, and he wasn't sure what to do next. There wasn't much to suggest Roy Winnett wasn't the right guy, except for Janell Rector's insistence that he'd wandered into the Last Chance right after the start of *Law & Order.* Well, it wasn't inconceivable that Janell was wrong—maybe tonight's episode had started later for some reason. He'd find a way to check on that tomorrow.

He drove up to the end of Main Street and pulled into the parking lot of the Town Pump, an all-night gas station and convenience store that also housed a keno parlor optimistically named Lucky

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Lil's Casino. The name always amused Ennis: There was no luck, and no Lil, and it was not precisely a casino in the sense of roulette wheels and croupiers—but there it was. His friend Chuck Butler, who managed the place, always said it was the most profitable part of the franchise. A couple of dusty pickups were parked outside—karaoke night diehards, Ennis guessed, making sure they emptied their pockets of every last bit of cash before heading home.

Chuck had his back to the door and was watching ESPN when Ennis came in. He was still wearing that stupid "Kawasakis for Christ" biker vest; he swore it was a motorcycle club he'd belonged to at some point in the 'eighties, even though Ennis had never run across any other members and had never known the guy to own a Kawasaki.

Chuck turned at Ennis's approach. "Yo, Adrian!" Chuck was immensely amused by this reference to the Rocky movies—and therefore to Ennis's hometown. He had been greeting the deputy this way nearly every day for the last seven years.

"Hey, Chuck."

"Shit, I heard about Dean Jackman." He shook his head. "Poor bastard. Saw it coming, though."

"Too bad he didn't."

Chuck rubbed the stubble on his ample chin. "Man, you just never know. Guy was in here earlier tonight. Get this: looking for white wine. All I got is pink; I don't know why they call it white zinfandel."

Ennis had wondered the same thing.

"By himself?"

"Acting like he was. But the Chuckerino sees all: He also bought a pack of Virginia Slims, and I don't believe Mr. Jackman smokes. Then when he leaves the store, I notice him smiling at somebody in the front seat. Tinted glass in the Escalade, so I can't get a positive ID. But I got a theory."

"You and the rest of the town, I think."

Chuck nodded. "Guess he and Alana decided to knock off early, check out each other's real estate. Hell of it was, bunch of kids were coming across the street just when Dean was going out. Little Richie—that's Roy's boy—was with them. You know, laughing and grab-assin' around, like kids do. I saw him stop when Dean opened his door. Suddenly he wasn't laughing no more. Looked like he'd been cold-cocked."

"That's bad."

Chuck shook his head sadly. "Yep. I think he saw his mom in there, Dean sliding in with a bottle of wine and a pack of smokes, and assumed the worst."

They considered this in silence. Ennis could see what had set Roy Winnett off on this particular night: The boy had gotten home before his mother and told what he'd seen. Possibly it had come as a complete shock: It wouldn't have been the first time a spouse

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being cheated on was the last to know. So Roy had canceled his hunting trip, probably spent the next hour or two drinking, his guts churning, waiting for the sound of his wife's Taurus in the driveway.

Ennis and Chuck gazed out at the empty street, watching leaves and paper debris hurrying by on the wind. Back in the casino, Ennis heard the dreary bleating of a keno machine—sounded as if one of the high-rollers back there was temporarily a few dollars richer.

Outside, the city police car pulled up to the pump. Kevin Heibein got out and started pumping gas, his narrow shoulders hunched against the cold. Ennis walked out to greet him.

"Hey," the young cop said, flashing a smile. "Busy night, huh? How you make out on that Westy's thing? Man, a homicide. Wish I could have helped."

"Yeah, me too," Ennis said. "What was the deal on the hit-and-run?"

"Oh, it wasn't a hit-and-run. Mae Begley was the driver, she made the call on her cell phone, stayed right there. She was pretty shook up. Wasn't her fault, though."

"Who got hit?"

"Kid on a bike. He'll live. Broken leg and a concussion. Scared the shit out of me, he was unconscious in the ditch when I got there. Thought he was dead." Heibein replaced the nozzle in the gas pump, the fuel cap on the old Crown Vic cruiser. He was shivering and drew his sleeve across his nose. "I didn't know him, but Keith, one of the EMTs, did. Richie Winnett, I guess his folks live up there about a mile. Dressed all in black, riding his damned mountain bike in the middle of the road . . ."

Heibein caught Ennis's look. "What? You know him, too?"

The weedy ditch was bathed in the lights of Ennis's cruiser; Heibein had parked his car at the curve with the flashers going.

"Right here, huh?"

Heibein swept a flashlight beam over a place in the barrow pit where the high weeds had been tramped down. A few bits of broken reflector gleamed in the gravel.

"See that rock? Kid lands one foot to the right and he's a vegetable. Little shit is lucky to be alive. You should see the bike."

Ennis produced his own flashlight and walked to the spot, playing the beam over the flattened weeds. He stopped, then moved forward slowly, studying the ground.

Heibein cleared his throat. "What you looking for? I'm pretty sure we got everything, the bike is back at the station . . ."

Ennis said nothing. He swept the beam carefully from side to side, advancing a half-step at a time. He was about to give up when he spied a dark shape and leaned forward.

Something about the fat checkered grips, the way they curled in the tall grass, brought to mind a rattlesnake. Ennis jerked his

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hand back, then leaned forward again, hoping Heibein hadn't noticed. He parted the weeds. It was a big revolver, dirt and grass on the hammer where it had fallen: Colt Anaconda, .44 caliber. Roy Winnett's other handgun, Ennis guessed. He was willing to bet this one had been fired a few hours earlier.

Worland only had two stoplights, and both were flashing yellow now, swaying in the north wind sweeping down from Canada. Ennis got out of the car and gazed up the street into the darkness beyond. The air smelled of wood smoke and frost; it wouldn't be long now until the first snow. The town was unusually empty, even for this late. Normally on karaoke night there might still be a car or two cruising Main, kids waiting in vain for something to happen, or a couple of mismatched refugees from the bars looking to parlay an evening's alcohol abuse into a night's romance. They had all gone home. Maybe word of the homicide had finally cast a pall over things. Maybe there was hope for the town after all.

He had just returned from another trip to the Winnett residence. It seemed Heibein had not gotten around to informing Alana about the injuries to her son—being new, he assumed somebody else had. At the doorway to her son's room, she had begun weeping uncontrollably at the sight of the empty bed. The darkened room was bitterly cold from the open window.

It was a short bike ride from the Winnett place to town, an even shorter distance north to Westy's Tavern. Had Richie Winnett set out meaning to kill his mother's lover, or had he just meant to threaten him? Hard to say: When loaded guns came out, sometimes motives and meanings went by the wayside. Ennis remembered what Ray Esposito had said about someone laughing, just before the shots. He had a hunch that wouldn't have been the boy. He could picture the shivering teenager in the gravel parking lot, his family unraveling and his father's pistol tucked into his jeans. Probably he would not have seen much humor in the situation. Dean, according to Alana, laughed at everything. Ennis had to wonder: What would have happened if Dean Jackman hadn't laughed?

Well, he'd know more if the boy was able to talk tomorrow. He couldn't help but feel sorry for the kid: waking up to a dozen different kinds of pain and a life forever changed. Not to mention his father. Ennis tried to remember the worst hangover he'd ever had, thought how much worse would be the one Roy Winnett had in store this morning. He thought of the damaged wives and the daughters, and finally thought of Dean Jackman himself, a man old enough to know better, getting up in front of a crowd and singing "Dancing in the Dark."

How did the song go? "Can't start a fire without a spark." True enough, Ennis thought. But when you did start that fire, there was no telling how much it would burn. ●

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False Light

by Margaret Murphy

Margaret Murphy's first novel, *Goodnight, My Angel,* was shortlisted for Britain's "First Blood" award for best debut crime novel. Her latest book, *The Dispossessed* (New English Library), was called "an eye-opening shocker of a novel" by the *Times Literary Supplement.*

From her viewpoint high above street level Carol can see St. George's Hall. Undergoing renovation, it is swathed in plastic, a colonnaded monument in bubble-wrap. To her right, the sun sinks low and golden over the Mersey tunnel entrance. She loves the broad sweep of steps down from the Greco-Roman facade of the museum. She walks slowly, taking her time, head up, shoulders back; it makes her feel grand, like a movie star. She wears a trouser suit—a good linen mix in pale green. Her hair, ice-blond and fine as spun silk, lifts in a faint breeze and she enjoys a moment of blessed coolness.

Carol has been working late on a new coleopteran exhibition. Her favourites are the iridescent types; they shimmer with false light—purple and green and electric blue—oil on water, prisms in sunlight. She checks her watch. Eight-thirty. Not too late to chance crossing the cobbled street into St. John's Gardens.

The borders are planted with blue violas and pink biennial dianthus; warmed by the sun and enclosed within the walls of the old churchyard of St. John's, the scent of violets and cloves is almost hypnotic. Laughter carries from one of the lawns to her right and she glances without turning her head. A group of students, talking, flirting, testing their knowledge of their current reading on their friends. Harmless.

She passes them unnoticed. She has learned the art of invisibility: Walk confidently but without show; look like you know where you're headed; stare straight through a crowd, as though you can see your goal unimpeded by the crush—as though they are invisible. Never meet the eye of a stranger.

Traffic is heavy, belching hot exhaust fumes into the already hot and exhausted air. Too early for the clubs, but too hot to wait indoors for dark, the streets are already thronged with youths in white shirts, eager for the rut, eyeing the tanned girls who flaunt their toned midriffs and thighs. Liverpool city centre swelters in a

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brown heat haze, the crowds irascible and uncomfortable in their own skins: The heat has taken the fun out of the game.

Central station is empty. She walks invisible past the guard at the ticket barrier. She hears voices raised, laughter; it echoes, reminding her of swimming baths, caves. Cave men. The constant scream of a faulty escalator handrail, rubber on metal, sets her teeth on edge, but it is cooler underground, and she is grateful for this.

The voices grow louder, nearer. She sees them without looking, using her peripheral vision. An untaught skill, urban survival. Three boys—only three. They hoot and howl, pounding the air with their shouts. The space—the emptiness of the platform—lends them size and significance. She keeps her gaze steady and flat, moves to the shelter of one of the massive square pillars to escape notice.

A faint whine and a puff of warm air announce the approach of a train. She hangs back, waiting to see what the boys will do. The vibration passes down the line like a series of whip-cracks, then the first glimpse: twin aspects, insectile, emerging from the dark. The train slows and stops with an electrical sigh.

The boys jostle each other into a carriage to her left. She steps into the next. Four or five others sit at discreet distances, respecting each other's space, taking care to avoid eye contact as they plunge into the tunnels and deep cuts on the edge of the city centre. Two disembark at Brunswick. Then she sees the three boys at the link doors; they peer into her carriage, grinning, making animal noises. She looks out of the window. They come in and she looks up again, alarmed, catches the eye of the man in the seat diagonally opposite. She sees him sometimes when she works late. Grey suit, tie loosened, respectable, early forties. He smiles and she is reassured. It's okay.

The boys sit at the far end of the carriage, out of sight, but she can hear them; their laughter, their sniggers. A whiff of solvent and the squeak of a marker pen on glass—they're vandalising the windows. She won't look. A woman gets off at St. Michael's; their mutual vulnerability allows a brief moment of contact. Carol sees her own fear reflected in the woman's eyes.

The boys get up—she sees them ghosted in the window—it's almost night and the steep embankments on either side of the track draw darkness down into the carriage. Two tall lads, one who looks younger, nervous. They are dressed in the uniform of sports gear, trainers, baseball caps. She takes her paperback from her shoulder bag and pretends to read. The largest of the three walks down the car and sits opposite, staring at her until she is forced to look up. He has short brown hair and grey hate-filled eyes. His mouth is twisted with fury—against what? She knows the standards: society, authority, the self; but looking into this boy's eyes she sees his hatred is directed at her. *You don't know me,* she wants to say, but the words won't come. He continues staring and she looks away again. Her invisibility has failed her.

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A man gets out at the next stop. She wants to get out with him, to stay close, to ask for his protection, but her legs won't carry her and she focuses instead on her book and prays the boy will go away.

Now it's just her and the three boys and the man in the suit. She wants to be home, to be out of the heat, drinking chilled wine, listening to the blackbird in her hawthorn tree improvising a tune in the last glimmer of dusk. She wants to be left alone.

The other two have been loitering at the far end of the carriage, but now one of them comes forward and kneels on the seat behind the tall youth, peering through the gap between the headrests. He has jug ears and a snub nose, which make him seem childlike—monstrous.

"D'you wanna come for a drink with us?" the first boy asks. His breath is thick with beer and vomit.

"I think you've had enough already, don't you?" Carol says.

The other boys laugh. "Boz is getting his arse kicked by a *girl!*" the second boy says.

Boz. Carol memorises the name.

Boz leans so close that she can't see her novel when she looks down at it. His hair gel smells of coconut oil. His hooded jacket is open, showing off his six-pack. *This is not a boy you want to humiliate,* she tells herself. *He's vain, and vanity does not forgive criticism.*

"D'you wanna bevvy-or what?"

"No," she says, pleased that her voice is so steady. "Thanks."

The second boy sobs theatrically. "She's breaking his heart!"

Boz grabs his crotch. "I might shag it, but I'm not in *love* with it." He lets his eyes drift to the top of her legs, the crease of her trousers. "You a natural blond?" he asks.

The skin on her scalp tingles and her heart flutters in her chest like a trapped bird. The man in the suit is reading his paper. *Is he deaf?* she wonders. *Can't he hear what's going on?*

Boz blows in her face and she flinches as if he has hit her. "Look at me when I'm talking to you, *bitch.*"

He is smirking, enjoying her humiliation, and a tiny spark of anger flares in her gut. "Sod off," she says, but too tentatively.

He mimics her; he's a good mimic, he captures her accent, her voice, the note of fear she cannot hide.

"I mean it," Carol says. "Back off or I'll call the guard."

His eyebrows lift. "Yeah? How you gonna do that? ESP?"

The emergency cord is six feet away, above the door. It might as well be six miles. She glances around the carriage for security cameras, but can't see any.

She stands. The boy stands with her. She moves left. He mirrors the movement.

The man in the suit is still reading his paper. *Bastard.*

"Excuse me," she says; her voice is weak, frightened. The man doesn't respond and the boy's eyes flicker greedily over her body.

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His sickly-sweet breath in her nostrils is an intrusion, a violation.

Why are you being so bloody polite?

"Hey!" she shouts.

Boz jerks back, startled.

The anger feels good. "HEY, YOU!" she shouts again, louder this time.

The man flicks down a corner of his newspaper. He seems irritated.

"Are you going to help me?" The way she asks, it's a clear accusation.

The boys watch, curious to see what he will do.

She sees a muscle jump in the man's jaw, then he exhales through his nose as if he has been asked to perform some irksome task.

He folds his paper neatly and places it on the seat beside him. The train slows and the recorded announcement tells them they are approaching Cressington. *Thank God*—her stop.

"That's us, Boz." The youngest boy has appeared suddenly by the door. He sounds troubled, unhappy.

The man stands in a smooth, easy movement. He's taller than they expected, more athletic, and the boy says again, the tremor in his voice accentuated by the rattle of the train, "Our stop, man."

Boz keeps his eyes on Carol, but she notices the tension in his shoulders, the bunching of his fists. He gives her one last disparaging look. "What—did you think it was grab-a-granny night?" He jabs a thumb towards the youngest boy, standing anxiously in the doorway. "I wouldn't even touch you with *his* dick."

The doors open and they're off, onto the platform, whooping and laughing, making barking noises at her. They swarm up the steep stone steps; she hears their footsteps echoing all the way through the Victorian station house. She looks at the man and he raises a shoulder, a slight smile on his face—embarrassment or amusement? She can't tell. Doesn't care.

Her stop. She steps out onto the platform. Seized by dread certainty, she stares wide-eyed at the stairwell. What if they're waiting for her outside the station? The narrow muddy shortcut she usually takes to Broughton Drive is dark and poorly lit, and even on the roadway there are places they might hide: behind skips outside the house refurbs, in the shop doorways on the main road. *To hell with it,* she'll go on to Garston, get a taxi home.

The warning buzzer sounds that the doors are about to close. She wheels round as they begin sliding shut, jumps back on the train. One of the doors slams into her shoulder and she is caught off-balance. She grabs the handrail and steadies herself. The man in the suit is watching her.

He sighs and smiles in resignation and welcome. He smells the fear on her. Exciting, raw, unrestrained. It smells of warmth. Of woman. Of pain. Of sex. ●

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The Right Call

by Brendan DuBois

On the first Tuesday of this particular month, I was at my desk in the tiny Boston Falls bureau office of the *Granite Times,* writing a story on deadline on a computer that was considered old when a certain President promised us a kinder, gentler government, when a phone call came in from a self-confessed mass murderer.

Rita Cloutier looked up from her phone at the front and said, "Call for you, Jack. Sounds like the phantom, yet again."

A new Brendan DuBois novel, *Primary Storm* (St. Martin's), an entry in the Lewis Cole series, is due out in September. A former research analyst for the Department of Defense, Cole gets involved in cases that have a touch of thriller to them. Mr. DuBois's new story for us is about a newspaper reporter—a job he himself held for years. ¶

I kept on looking at the screen, trying to decide if I could spell Contoocook River without having to look it up, and I called out, "See if he'd be so kind as to call back after deadline. Most mass murderers have some courtesy, don't they?"

Rita giggled, like the seventeen-year-old schoolgirl she was thirty years ago. I looked over at her and my surroundings. We were in a tiny storefront with a waist-high counter where people came in to place their classified ads or complain about missed newspapers. Rita sat right by the doorway, and between the two of us was an empty desk that belonged to Monty Hughes, the local circulation manager. My desk was up against the window, which I thought was a privilege reserved for the sole reporter in this news bureau, until the first heavy rains came and the damn thing leaked and soaked my desk. Some privilege.

I leaned back in my chair and tried to admire the view from the window, which was tough to do. The window overlooked a seldom-used rail spur for the leather mill upstream, and the rail spur was next to an overgrown, sluggish canal that spawned mosquitoes in the summer and not much else. For a moment I recalled the office I had in Manchester, at the main offices of the *Granite Times.* A door of my own. A parking space. A company cafeteria. I sighed. That's what happens when you get too trusting with a news source, Jack. Exiled to the farthest reaches of the *Granite Times* empire.

"Jack?" Rita's voice queried.

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Still leaning back in the chair, I reached over and picked up the phone. "Hello," I said.

"Jack Spooner?" came the familiar voice.

"The same," I said. "What do you have for me today?"

A heavy sigh. "I killed them all, you know. All twenty-four of them. But I had to. What else could I have done?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said, leaning forward so I could wrap up the news story I was working on. Three-car accident on Route 302. Minor injuries. Would probably end up as a news brief but it had been a slow news day. "You could have short-sheeted their beds when they weren't looking. Wouldn't that have been easier?"

A petulant tone. "You're not taking me serious."

There. Finished. I sent the story along the fiberoptic cables to my editor a hundred miles south, and returned to my mysterious caller. "Wrong," I said. "You're the one who's not taking me seriously."

With my free hand I opened up my cluttered center desk drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Let's see," I said, looking over the phone log that I had started with this character more than four months ago, "you've called me more than a dozen times. Each time you say something similar. That some years ago you killed twenty-four people. It happened on a Tuesday. That it wasn't your fault. Period. The End. How am I supposed to take you seriously if you don't give me more than that?"

The petulant tone was still there. "I thought reporters were more open-minded than this."

"Bad reporters are, not good reporters. Look, I've got real work to do. Anything else you want to say before I hang up?"

"I . . . I did it near here. On Shay's Meadow, by the Graham River."

I was so eager to take this down that I dropped the pen on the floor. "Hello? Say again?"

I was talking into a dead phone. My mystery caller had hung up.

I returned the favor, then picked up my pen and quickly scribbled down what he had just said.

I'd been working for the *Granite Times* for almost two years, after spending some time at a weekly near Conway, by the Maine border. I started out at their Manchester headquarters, and would have gladly stayed there as I established my burgeoning newspaper career, except for an unfortunate incident on my part where I didn't dot all the *i*'s and cross all the *t*'s while doing a silly little feature story. The mistakes associated with the story might have ended a career at any other newspaper. The *Granite Times* not being that kind of newspaper—and desperate to hold on to reporters during a tight labor market—I got exiled instead of fired.

I looked over the log sheet that I had started that first Tuesday, when my phantom caller had rung me up. I had taken a lot of notes, thinking that I had a key to a great story that would get me

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back into the good graces of my editors down south. I still remember that day, a clean and empty desk before me, a nearly empty reporter's notebook at my elbow, when the phone rang and Rita picked it up and said, "Oh. Hold on."

Then the caller started, as he would so many times later: "Jack? Jack Spooner?"

I had said yes and then the confession began, one that ended too soon.

I passed him off as a nut when he called the Tuesday after that, and the Tuesday after that. I asked Rita and Monty, the circulation guy, if the previous reporter, Mindy Williams—who now worked at the copy desk down in Manchester and whom I envied and hated in about equal measure for grabbing such a cushy job—had pursued a story based on anonymous phone calls and they both said no.

So. Any other reporter probably would have given up on the phantom and forgotten about it.

But not me. Like I said, I'm not like other reporters. And I still wanted that key to get out of Boston Falls. It was a perfectly nice town, but I knew I didn't belong here. I felt like a person invited to a wedding reception where everyone else is family and friends, and you're trying to find a way to make a graceful exit.

The rest of the morning was spent doing a feature for the Sunday edition about a woodworking business on the other side of town that had thrived by doing knockoffs—oops, excuse me, artistic interpretations—of famous Shaker furniture. That was another depressing aspect of my exile here to this little town. Back in Manchester—New Hampshire's largest city—I'd focused on crime stories, with an occasional feature piece to relax my brain. Here, it was exactly the opposite, with most of my stories being features and small-town stories, with only the occasional crime (usually an outburst of teenage vandalism on a warm summer night) to break the monotony. After you've done ride-alongs with Manchester cops, breaking into crack houses right behind the TAC cops, doing a lengthy feature on a guy who makes boxes and rocking chairs is torture.

The purpose of the exile, I suppose.

Just before lunch, I went into the rear storage area and pulled down a bound copy of the *Granite Times* from 1978, looking for a particular story. I figured that if my mysterious caller was telling the truth—a stretch, I admit—I might find something in the back issues to match what he was claiming. Both Rita and Monty said they had no idea what the caller was talking about, but after my bad experience in Manchester, I was determined to look into it myself. I had spent weeks scanning past years' issues, every Tuesday edition of the newspaper, until I realized my stupidity and began glancing through the Wednesday issues as well.

It would have been easier to check microfilm but the nearest

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large library was in Purmort, about an hour away.

So before the appointed noon hour, I spent awhile back in 1978, back when a peanut farmer was President and the biggest news around Boston Falls was whether or not the leather mill would close.

The peanut farmer now builds furniture and makes life miserable for his successors, and the debate over the leather mill continues. When my stomach grumbles increased, I wrapped up 1978 and went out to have lunch.

Lunch on this particular Tuesday was with the police chief, detective, patrol officer, and juvenile officer for the town of Boston Falls, and involved takeout submarine sandwiches from Dot's Place, about three doors up from our bureau office. We met in the police department's tiny basement office in the town hall, on the other side of the town common. The entire police force, in the person of Connie Simpson, looked up at me as I came in bearing lunch. Her skin looked freshly tanned and I could tell that her dark blond hair had also recently been trimmed.

"Mmm," she said. She wiggled her nose. "Smells like fat and grease and meat. How yummy."

I sat down across from her as she cleared her desk. Connie wore the dark blue uniform of the Boston Falls police department, and in my humble opinion, she wears it pretty well. I passed over her sandwich—steak, cheese, peppers, onions, tomatoes, and whatever else was handy—and opened up my own, just steak and cheese. In some areas I remain a puritan, including food preparation.

When we got into the cleanup phase and were piling up the greasy napkins, I said, "Two questions, Chief."

"Go right ahead." Connie's a few years older than me, though she refuses to get specific.

"Ever hear of a place called Shay's Meadow, near the Graham River?"

She wiped her delicate lips with a white paper napkin. "Sure. Go up Timberswamp Road, take the second right after the bridge. Dirt road leads out to a gravel pit. Just beyond that is Shay's Meadow."

"And the owner is . . . ?"

"The town of Boston Falls," she said. "Conservation land, donated to the town back in the nineteen forties, if I remember correctly. Which is why that particular lot can be a real pain in the ass."

"Why's that?"

She leaned back in her chair and tossed the napkin into a trash can, while I tried not to stare too hard at how she filled out her uniform shirt. "It's a popular place for kids to raise hell. Make a bonfire, drink beer, shoot off fireworks. Every couple of weeks I get a call to go up there and roust them out."

"Anything in particular happen out there?"

She grinned and took a sip of her Diet Coke. "What kind of

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particular?"

"Homicide," I said. "Some time ago, in that location."

Connie put the can down on her clean desk. "Let me guess. It's Tuesday. Must have been your mystery caller."

"Well," I said a bit defensively, "you could take it seriously, Chief. A confessed mass murderer and all that. You could put a tap on that phone line, or get phone company records, find out where the call is coming from. Would be a pretty good chit for your record, right?"

Though Connie was still smiling at me, the look had gotten distinctively chilly. "Jack, do you know how many unsolved murders the entire state of New Hampshire—from Canada to the Massachusetts border—currently has?"

"I have no idea, though I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"Twelve. For the entire state. Going back more than a decade. And I'll clue you in to something yet again. None of those unsolved crimes took place in and around Boston Falls. The only homicide we've had here took place about thirty years ago, involved a high-school boy who broke into an old man's house. Period. Plus, don't you think the attorney general's office might be aware of a crime involving more than twenty deaths?"

The day was becoming a bust and I decided to wrap this part up. "Okay, all I know is that I keep on getting phone calls from some guy, saying he's killed twenty-four people. But today he told me that it took place on Shay's Meadow. That's why I'm asking."

Connie shook her head. "Poor Jack, still looking for that big story to spring you out of here, right?"

I ignored her and said, "All right, time for my second question."

She laughed. "Hold on, you've asked me more than just two. What's going on here?"

"Only the first question counted. The others were just follow-ups. And here's the second question. How about dinner this Saturday night, over in Compton? Then we can catch the fireworks show up on Lake Montcalm."

She shook her head. "Sorry, Jack. You know the answer. No can do."

"Why not? We get along, we're about the same age, we have jobs that bring us into contact every day. We certainly won't lack for interesting conversation."

The head shake again, slower. "Sorry, Jack. Lunch is fine. Lunch is wonderful. But that's it for now."

"Still worried about the gossipers ruining your reputation?"

"If I had one to ruin, I'd worry about it. Sorry, let's just leave it. All right?"

Oh well. Shot down in flames yet again. I said, "Okay, but just one more question before I leave."

"Go ahead."

"Nice tan. Where did you go?"

"Oh, I spent a few days with my sister. She rented a condo near

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Hampton Beach."

"Never heard of it," I said. "Anywhere near Tyler Beach?"

"Beats me, all those beaches look the same to me," Connie said. "Now it's time for my question. When are you going to tell me what you did that got you exiled out here?"

I got up from her desk. "You'll find out the night we have dinner together."

"Then I guess we're both in for a long wait," she said, her smile no longer so frosty.

"I guess so."

About twenty minutes later I was in knee-high grass, insects whirling about me, as I strode down near the Graham River. The police chief's directions were perfect and I had parked my car near the gravel pit, which had some old charred wood and piles of empty beer cans in the center. Shay's Meadow was a large field, bordered on three sides by lines of maples and birches. It sloped down gradually to the river, which was one of the cleanest in the state. Until it went through Boston Falls and its leather mill, of course.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Maybe a pile of bones. Maybe a series of graveyards. Maybe a signed confession in a bottle sitting on top of a rock. You never know. But all I saw was a beautiful New Hampshire field and in the distance, the eastern peaks of the White Mountains.

I was admiring the view so much that I didn't look where I was going, so of course I tripped over something and fell flat on my face.

I got up, cursing some at the cuts and scrapes on my hands. Grass is delicate and beautiful, except when it's long and when you fall into it. Then it can be as sharp as razor blades.

I looked at what had tripped me up, and found an old concrete post, sticking out of the ground about two feet. In the center of the post was a square section where I poked at a chunk of rotten wood. Interesting. I got up and walked some more, and damn if I didn't trip again and fall down. I stayed there for a moment, to see if anyone was around laughing at me, but all I heard were birds and the low whirr of insects, so I got up. Post number two looked exactly like post number one. I got back down on my hands and knees and went exploring.

In less than five minutes, I had found a dozen such posts, located in a rectangle.

Making my way to the woodline, I snapped off a piece of pine branch and swept the grass in front of me, and in another hour on Shay's Meadow, I found about a dozen rectangles, each made up of a dozen concrete posts.

I sat on one of the posts and thought for a while, wondering about mass murder and this peaceful place. I stared at the slow-moving river for quite a while, until the mosquitoes finally drove me home.

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The next day I waited in the bureau until deadline had passed and Rita Cloutier had gone out for lunch. That left me and Monty Hughes. Monty was somewhere between forty and fifty and lived alone in an apartment on the north side of town. He had a good-sized beer gut and wore black slacks and white long-sleeve shirts in winter and white short-sleeve shirts in summer. His black hair was slicked back and never touched his shirt collar, and the color of his hair matched both his moustache and frames of his eyeglasses.

Each morning and each afternoon he would smoke a single cigarette at his desk, as he worked on audit numbers or made phone calls. Not once had I ever seen him get upset, and believe me, newspaper circulation manager is another description for lightning rod. Dealing with irate customers, lazy paperboys and papergirls, and irritated parents who can't believe that their hardworking sons and daughters would dump newspapers in shrubbery instead of doorways would drive many a man to shaky hands and blurry eyes. But not Monty. He'd just nod and listen to all the rants and raves, and go about his business.

His business included more than just the *Granite Times.* Monty was one of those unsung and nearly invisible people who keep a small town like this one alive. He served on the conservation commission, the zoning board, the local Boy Scout council, and for my purposes today, he was head of the Boston Falls Historical Society.

When Monty had snubbed out his single cigarette of the afternoon, I called over to him. "Got a sec for a question, Monty?"

"Sure, sport, go ahead," he said, going through a handful of papers on his desk.

"Got a question about something historical, thought it might be right up your alley."

"And what's the question?"

"Shay's Meadow, out by the gravel pit on Timberswamp Road. What was there before?"

Monty kept his eyes on his papers. "Before what?"

"Before all that was left was the concrete posts. I was up there yesterday and found all these concrete posts, in some sort of pattern. They looked like footings for buildings. What kind of structures used to be there?"

Monty's voice didn't change. "And why were you up on Shay's Meadow?"

Voice change or not, I didn't like the question. "Just wandering around. So what was there? Buildings belonging to the town? A farm? A business?"

A small shake of the head. "Don't rightly know, Jack. Sorry, I can't help you."

I leaned across my desk. "Oh, come on, Monty. You've grown up here, you know everybody in town, you've been with the historical

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society for years. What do you mean, you don't know?"

"Just what I said. I don't know."

"Monty . . ."

He looked up at me, his face expressionless. "Tell me, sport. Who killed JFK?"

"Hunh?" By now I was equal parts confused and frustrated, a mixture I didn't like.

"You heard me. The most powerful man in the world was shot and killed before a movie camera and dozens and dozens of witnesses, including Secret Service agents, government officials, and members of the news media. All of this took place on November twenty-second, nineteen sixty-three. So tell me. Who killed him?"

I said, "Lee Harvey Oswald."

Monty nodded. "An easy answer. But you know the truth. Hundreds of books and dozens of TV specials and movies have all been made around that single question: Who killed the President? And despite all that occurred, despite the movie camera and all those witnesses, nobody can agree on who did the shooting, why the shooting occurred, and how many shots were fired."

"Nice little lesson, Monty, but—"

He interrupted me. "So listen here, sport. If all that's true, that something so violent could happen in public to such an important man, then don't go telling me that I should know everything here in Boston Falls. Small towns like their secrets and they manage to keep them nice and tight. Which means not everything's out there for answers."

I had a thought. "Are you telling me you don't know what's out there, or you do know and won't tell me?"

Monty went back to his paperwork. "Don't be offended, sport, but what I'm telling you is that you're just like every other young man and woman who's sat at that desk. You roll in here with your college degree and fresh ideas, full of energy and enthusiasm, and you go through this town, stirring things up and writing your stories. Not a problem, if any of you would learn what this town is about and how the people live here, year after year. Nope, all you reporters care about is making your mark and then moving on."

"That's the way the business is, Monty. You know that."

"Yeah, but it doesn't mean I have to like it. Rita's been here ten years, I've been here eleven. You know the longest duration of any reporter that's stayed here? Ten months, that's all. Not even a full year. Not even time to learn enough about the people here and show the proper respect. So there you have it, sport. Anything else?"

"Yeah," I said, turning to my computer terminal. "Don't call me sport anymore."

For a moment it looked as if he might smile. "All right, Jack."

Later that night, after having dinner by myself in my apartment

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in Boston Falls, I went out on the tiny rear deck that probably added about fifty dollars a month to my rent. In Manchester, I had lived in a condo complex downtown, where the old mill buildings were being rejuvenated with fresh money and fresh people. I hardly ever ate dinner by myself back then. My usual schedule included drinks and get-togethers after work with my fellow reporters, editors, and whatnot from the paper. Sometimes, if I was very lucky, one of those fellow newspaper types would come back and visit me at my rented condo, with its high cathedral ceilings and great views of the renewed waterfront.

Here, my colleagues were Rita and Monty, neither of whom seemed particularly interested in seeing me after work—and to be truthful, I shared their disinterest. Now dinner was a frozen pizza, cooked in an oven that had to be nursed along, since its temperatures varied widely according to the time of day. My apartment was one of four in a building that had been built in the early 1800's, before the concept of insulation and soundproofing. The apartment next-door was occupied by a mother and daughter on public assistance who seemed to get great joy from yelling at one another. One of the apartments downstairs was rented by a little old lady who loved action movies, and since she was hard of hearing, she liked to play them so loud that each explosion and machine gun burst would make the walls shake. The other apartment downstairs was rented by a young couple with three children, trying to make a go of it by working at the mills, and while they were fine, children can be children.

Which is why I spent a lot of my free time at home sitting on the tiny rear deck, looking at the dirt parking lot that abutted Tony's Towing and Auto Salvage. A funny thing: often I would do a story about a car accident and see the crumpled remains on one of the town's twisty roads, and by the time I got home, Tony would be there, backing in the same crushed debris.

But there was no such entertainment tonight. Just me, sulking, nursing a Sam Adams beer. Earlier today, after my frustrating conversation with Monty, I had made phone calls to other people I knew in Boston Falls. The town clerk. The three selectmen. Members of the zoning board and planning board. Other members of the town's historical society. And it was like a computer virus had suddenly spread to all of them, affecting their memories. Not one knew anything about what had been up at Shay's Meadow. Not one.

So what was going on?

I took a swallow of my brew. Let's look at the facts. Our mysterious Tuesday caller claims that he's responsible for killing a number of people. This week, however, he slips in an extra piece of information. That this dreadful event had occurred up on Shay's Meadow. On Shay's Meadow are the remains of what look like concrete footings for structures of some kind. But the police chief and

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about every other breathing individual in this town claims no knowledge of what had been up there.

Yeah, right. Facts.

There were other facts as well, a little voice inside of me said. Right? Right. Like the boxes of books, clothing, and other personal belongings piled up in my spare bedroom. No time to unpack since moving here, or no interest? Monty was right. We're here to make our mark, make the editors down south forget about the foul-up that exiled us here. We're not here to serve the people in this town, to learn who they are or what they do. Nope, we're here to feed off of them, until we can go back to an office with a door and a condo with a swimming pool in the complex.

And while we're looking at facts, Mr. Drinking-a-Beer-All-Alone, how many of your wonderful friends and acquaintances down south have been up here to meet you since your exile?

Easy answer: none.

Exiled from what you thought was your home, and ending up at a place where you didn't fit in. I finished my beer and thought some more, as the mother-and-daughter team next-door started yelling about whose turn it was this week to clean the bathroom.

Facts. Didn't mean I particularly liked any of them.

The next day at my desk, I sent off an e-mail before I did anything else, and then did the usual grunt work of the morning: calling the fire departments and police departments in the local towns as well as the county dispatch center to see if anything interesting had happened overnight. The first few weeks after I arrived in Boston Falls, I insisted on driving around and looking at all of the logs myself, because I couldn't see trusting any of these people to tell me what was going on. I quickly found out how stupid I had been: The people in these towns are proud of what their departments do, and they want stories about them to appear in the newspaper. Not like other places I'd worked, where it sometimes took a court order and a crowbar to get information.

After writing a small piece about a chimney fire that night in Denson and a car accident involving a deer and a pickup truck (score: truck 1, deer 0), I found a reply to my e-mail. And this reply actually frightened me for how simple it was:

> FROM: mwilliams@granitetimes.com
> TO: jspooner@granitetimes.com
> SUBJECT: Re: Your tenure
> <<You wrote: Dear Mindy, Jack Spooner up here in Boston Falls. Hope you're enjoying your time in Manchester. Quick question. While you were up here, did you get any odd phone calls on a weekly basis? Thanks, Jack>>

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Jack—
Do you mean my Tuesday killer? Yep, every Tuesday, some wacko would call, saying he had killed a bunch of people. Spent a few hours trying to track him down, gave it up after a while. Just hung up on him when he called. Sorry about how you got up to my old job. Tell Rita I said hi. If Monty remembers who I am, tell him I said hi as well.
—Mindy

So. I quickly deleted the message and pretended to look through my desk drawers for something as I thought about what I had just read. Simple and to the point. I hadn't been the first recipient of the phantom caller's confessions. My predecessor had received his calls as well.

I looked up at Rita, busily typing up classified ads to send south, and over at Monty, on the phone with some subscriber upset at some damn thing. Rita and Monty. I had been here four months and thought I knew them both pretty well. Monty and his whole history of being a townie and the circulation manager. Rita, of an undeterminable age, widowed when her husband got caught in some machinery at the leather mill a few years back. Didn't seem to mind being a widow, and told me once that she started dating enthusiastically exactly one year after the funeral of her husband. Rita and Monty were friendly enough to me, gave me news tips, even sometimes intervened when something delicate came along—like the time a promising high-school boy got killed in a car accident and I needed a picture for the paper, and Monty took care of it.

I'd thought I knew them both pretty well. But now I knew I didn't know them one damn bit.

Later that day I went to the Boston Falls Free Library, just up the street from the town hall and police station. It's open from noon to five, Tuesday through Saturday, and struggles along by the generosity of the town's taxpayers and those who donate books. I'm slightly embarrassed to say that this particular visit was only my second since moving to town; the first was the week I arrived in Boston Falls, when I came by to get a library card.

Today I went to the card catalog and identified the book I was looking for, and went to the shelves. I checked the Dewey Decimal number that I had written down on a paper scrap, and checked again. Gone.

At the front table an older gentleman looked up at me from his copy of *National Geographic* magazine. Nate something or other, the town librarian.

"Yes?" he said, pulling his glasses up to his eyes.

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"I'm looking for a copy of a book," I said. "It's called *Boston Falls, 1700-1970: A History.*"

"Ah yes," he said, smiling slightly. "I'm afraid it's been checked out."

"The card catalog said there were two copies available. Have both been checked out?"

"Yes, it does look that way, doesn't it?"

I tried to keep my voice even. "Any idea when either of them will come back?"

A slight shrug of his thin shoulders. "This is a small-town library, son. Nice, friendly place. I guess those books will come back when the people that have them are finished."

Then he went back to his magazine, and I went outside. Strange that both copies of the book that I was looking for had disappeared.

Almost as strange as the town librarian knowing what books had been checked out without looking at his own card system.

I had a drink with the police chief after my interesting visit to the library. It sounds quite delicious and intriguing, a drink with the police chief, except it was a can of Diet Coke for her and a real Coke for me while we sat in her police cruiser, running radar on Route 4, the only state road through town.

It was warm and I noticed how thin strands of Connie's hair were escaping from her short ponytail to delicately adhere to her smooth cheek. But I kept things under control and asked her, "Why did you come back here?"

"What do you mean?" she said, balancing the can on her knee. Her uniform pants leg stretched up and I caught a glimpse of tanned shin and had a quick and enjoyable thought of how she might have looked in a bathing suit while on vacation.

"I mean, you told me you went to college down south at UNH, got a degree in sociology, and then entered police work. With a good record and with a lot of departments in this state trying to hire more women, why come back to Boston Falls?"

She grinned at me. "Because it's home, silly."

Well, duh. "I know it's home, but there has to be more than that."

"Really? Jack, tell me more of how you became a reporter and how you ended up here. Without telling me the dark secret about your exile."

I rubbed my thumb across the metal top of the can. "Not much to say. Grew up an only child in one of those northern suburbs of Boston. Majored in English at UMass Amherst, found out quickly that teaching English to kids more interested in dating or the Internet wasn't my bag. Worked a few more years as a tech writer for a couple of companies, and found out that trying to turn engineering English into real English also wasn't my bag. Then I thought I'd try my hand at newspaper work. Worked on a couple of

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weeklies and small dailies, and then ended up at the *Granite Times*. End of career story."

"So," she said, "how many places have you lived since college?"

I shrugged. "Eight, maybe nine."

"Are your parents still in Massachusetts?"

"Both retired, living out in Arizona, enjoying their second or third childhood by now. I've lost count." Then, I don't know why I said it, but I did. Maybe it was her interrogatory skills. "Truth is, Connie, I think they're quite glad that I'm out and about and on my own, and that they have no other children to care about. It's like I was a mistake or something, or that after I came along, they decided parenthood wasn't for them. In any event, we all seem quite content with the occasional postcard and letter, and phone calls on Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Christmas."

"Uh-huh," she said, and a car sped by and her radar detector bleeped, but she didn't bother looking at the numeral readout to see if the car had in fact been speeding. "Let me tell you my own story, for comparison's sake, nothing else. I grew up here and knew the names and backgrounds of all my neighbors and relatives, including third cousins. I can go into High Point cemetery and find the graves of my ancestors who came here in the 1700's. I could go to the Founder's Day Festival and know the name and address of everyone there. That's what it was like, growing up in Boston Falls."

"Sounds claustrophobic."

"Nope," she said, tapping the can on her knee. "It was invigorating, knowing that I was bound into the fabric of this little place, that it would always be home, would always be a place I could call my own. That's why I came back here. I couldn't think of living or working anywhere else. Ever since I came back, I'm convinced I made the right call."

"You don't find that small towns equal small minds?"

"Not for a moment. We may be small, but we're close-knit. We look out for each other."

I decided to take a shot. "Does that mean keeping secret what once happened up on Shay's Meadow?"

She kept on looking out the windshield, and now she was smiling. "Old Jack Spooner. Still looking for that big story."

"Among other things," I said. "Including a big date. How about this Sunday evening?"

The chief put the cruiser in drive. "How about I take you back to town?"

I wanted to protest, but I never get into a heated discussion with a woman who carries both a gun and handcuffs.

Late that night, I was in the spare bedroom of my apartment, which I had turned into a half-ass office. I guess if I had bothered to unpack my collection of books and other items, it would be a

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full-ass office. By the wall that had the only window in the room—which also offered a delightful view of the nearby junkyard—I had set up my desk and my PC. I looked at the glowing screen in the darkness of the room. I imagined the several thousand people out there in Boston Falls this evening, all of them related to each other and knowing each other, knowing not only names and addresses but histories. Background. Who married whom back in 1968. Who went off to the Merchant Marine in World War I. Who humiliated his family in 1862 by moving to Georgia and fighting for the South.

I remembered what the chief had said earlier. In the darkness of this little room, knowing that my small collection of relatives were scattered around New England and the rest of the country . . . Well, I could see why it would be comforting. The chief had made the right call.

Still, though. All of these people, knowing one another's secrets. All of this knowledge. All of this moving around in the confines of a small town. Like an organization, a defense organization.

Then an outsider comes in. Asking embarrassing questions. Questions about something related to a mass killing, of twenty-four people.

What then? The group comes together. The group forms a defense. Questions go unanswered, phone calls go unreturned, and books disappear from library shelves.

The small town closes ranks, puts on a friendly face, and waits until the outsider leaves or quits asking questions.

I sighed, reached forward, and started tapping on my keyboard. Within a few moments I was deep on the World Wide Web, on the homepage of a New England used-book dealer who claimed a collection in the thousands and offered overnight delivery.

There. *Boston Falls, 1700-1970: A History.* A couple of clicks on the keyboard and the book was mine.

This outsider wasn't planning to follow this town's script.

Two days later, I left the office early and told Monty and Rita that I was heading over to the Superior Court building—a good half-hour drive away—but instead I made a shorter drive. I ended up at my apartment building and sat on the front stoop, waiting for the mail to show up.

I suppose I could have just picked up the mail when I got home at my usual hour, but the past few days had fed every reporter's instinct for paranoia and conspiracies. Not that I believed the U. S. mail could be intercepted and packages made to disappear, but . . . Anyhow, I felt better waiting for the mail to arrive. I was beginning to believe that I was living in a town out of a Shirley Jackson short story, and I didn't want to be on the receiving end of any rock-throwing.

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In the end, it was almost anticlimactic. A heavyset woman in a U.S. Postal Service uniform came up the cracked sidewalk, trundling her little mailbag. The package from the bookstore was left in my hands, and I tore open the heavy paper and took a look.

Typical small-town history book. Self-published and maybe a thousand copies. This one's cover was soiled and the binding was cracked, but I didn't care. I flipped the book open to the rear index and found three references to Shay's Meadow. The first reference was for 1774, when the town's militia drilled for a time on Shay's Meadow. The second reference was to a great party and picnic held on Shay's Meadow in 1900, to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the town's founding.

The third reference was to something that took place in Shay's Meadow in 1944. Something went *ker-plunk* in my chest as I read a page and a half of what was in Shay's Meadow at the time, and what had happened there later that summer in 1944.

I went back to the newspaper office and puttered through the rest of the day, trying hard to be relaxed. The book was safely at home, in a box inside my bedroom closet. Monty did his usual phone work while Rita chatted with customers who came in to place classified ads announcing yard sales, lost pets, and church ham-and-bean dinners. When four P.M. came Monty announced that he was going out to see a couple of paperboys about their work habits, and when five P.M. rolled around, Rita said her day was through and asked me to lock up the office when I was done.

I said sure.

About fifteen minutes after Rita left I turned off the lights out front, locked the front door, and went back to the storage room. I went through the leather-bound volumes of the old *Granite Times* until I found the set I wanted. March 1944. It was a thin volume, and the old yellow sheets felt brittle in my hands. The musty smell transported me back in time, as I studied the tiny print under the large headlines. The advertisements were so innocent-looking that I hesitated over them. OD 30 deodorant. An appeal by the local Red Cross. And playing at the downtown Strand Theater—still operating to this day—was the movie *A Guy Named Joe,* starring Spencer Tracy.

Some of the stories were familiar: road construction bonds, town meeting disputes over loose dogs, and a one-car accident in the town common involving a drunk driver and an ancient maple tree.

But there were other headlines as well, headlines that reminded me just how different things were back then, when guys my age and much younger were involved in a worldwide struggle against darkness. NAZIS IN HUNGARY. PARTISAN FIGHTING CONTINUES IN BALKANS. And on page two of the paper, the latest casualty lists from the army and navy, breaking down who was wounded and who was killed from the local towns, and in which

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theater of operation it had occurred. In the list for the Boston Falls area there were a handful of dead, names like Coughlin, Dupont, Dupuis, and Morrill.

Then, the headline I had been looking for, and I looked up just for a moment, to make sure I wasn't being watched.

WAR DEPARTMENT SAYS PW CAMP TO OPEN SOON.

Then, underneath the headline, the lead of the story: "The War Department announced yesterday that a prisoner of war camp for German and Italian prisoners will open in the next few weeks. The camp, located on Shay's Meadow, is expected to hold up to five hundred PWs."

I stared at the paper, rubbed the brittle surface. Then I started flipping through the pages, faster and faster, trying to avoid the headlines about battles in Europe and the Pacific, about scrap drives and bond drives, stories about mud season and budget appropriations.

Every now and then, a small story would appear about the prisoner of war camp up on Shay's Meadow, a camp that had disappeared and now only existed in these faded sheets of paper and the concrete footings that were still there. The stories talked about the arrival of German and Italian prisoners from North Africa, how some of them would be working in the summer planting crops, or in the forests, cutting lumber. There had even been an escape, when an Italian prisoner who had fallen in love with a local girl had just walked away from a weeding detail at a local farm, and was picked up less than a day later.

My hands started moving more slowly as I reached the month of June. There, June 13th. The headline was on the front page, complete with a photo.

FAST-MOVING FIRE KILLS 24 AT PW CAMP. I read through the story, seeing how the blaze had started in one of the barracks, how it had been blamed on an electrical short or the careless disposal of cigarettes. The photo showed the members of the Boston Falls Volunteer Fire Department wetting down the wreckage of the barracks, smoke billowing out from the blackened timbers. I looked again at the headline. Twenty-four dead. I was getting ready to close the volume when I saw a small sidebar story with a tiny headline: Local Soldier Discovers Fire. The story said that the fire had been discovered by Paul Gagnon, a Boston Falls boy who had unexpectedly been stationed in his own hometown to serve as a guard at the PW camp.

I thought for a few moments, and then I flipped back through the month of June, looking for something familiar, something I had seen before. I found it on page two of the issue from June 9th.

Then I jumped as the phone at my desk started ringing. I snapped the bound volume shut and looked toward my desk, where the shrill ringing continued. I wondered who was calling

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me here, who knew I was still in the office.

The phone kept on ringing.

Come on, I thought. *This is a small office. Why are you letting it ring so long? Don't you know no one's here?*

The ringing continued.

"Fine," I said. I got up, prepared to answer it, but just as I reached it, it stopped ringing.

I put the bound volume back in its place, and went home and locked all my doors and windows.

It was now Tuesday morning. Over the weekend I'd gone for a drive by myself, down to the beaches of New Hampshire, about a three-hour drive away. I rented a room in a small beachfront motel—spending about a quarter of my monthly rent bill for a two-night stay—and spent a fruitless few hours unsuccessfully looking for the beach that Connie Simpson, the police chief, had stayed at. I thought I would enjoy being on the wide sands, with all the delightful attractions in bathing suits around me, but my thoughts kept on going back to a small town with tall trees and sharp hills.

On Monday, after taking care of the weekend police and fire logs and writing a weekend wrap-up for that day's paper, I spent the day at the town hall and the county courthouse, quietly checking records—the mundane paperwork that can lead you right to someone's home address.

Now, Tuesday morning, I was walking down the freshly washed and shined floors of the Crawford County Rest Home, past the quiet staff efficiently taking care of the residents, some in wheelchairs, others sitting in a large sunroom. I was looking for someone in particular, and in Room 104, I found him.

Mr. Paul Gagnon, formerly of the U. S. Army and the War Department's Prisoner of War Camp in Boston Falls, New Hampshire, was sitting in a chair near the window overlooking the parking lot. He looked over at me for a moment as I came in, and then resumed his gaze outside. He was nearly completely bald, with just a short frizz of white hair circling his wrinkled and freckled scalp. He had an afghan on his lap, and his black-and-red-checked shirt was buttoned all the way up to his fleshy neck. His black-rimmed glasses were repaired on one side with a strip of tape. On a shelf near the window were a collection of photos and glass knickknacks, and in his lap, his large and slowly shaking hands held a telephone. I looked at the photos for a moment and wasn't surprised to see a face that I recognized.

I took a spare chair and looked across him, past the carefully made bed. Soft music was piped in from speakers overhead, and the room had the smell of old medicine and old memories. The television set was on, but the volume had been turned down.

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"Mr. Gagnon?" I said, my reporter's notebook closed in my lap. "Mr. Gagnon, my name is Jack Spooner. I'm from the *Granite Times*. I decided to come here today, so you can talk to me face-to-face instead of making your call."

He spoke up, his voice quiet. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do," I said. "You've been calling me every Tuesday morning for the past few months, wanting to confess about those twenty-four dead prisoners of war, up on Shay's Meadow." Then I lied. "The phone records prove it."

That seemed to make him think, for he sighed and shifted in his seat, and continued looking out the window. The minutes passed and then he said, "I don't have anything to say to you."

"Sure you do," I said. "You've been saying things to me every week now, every Tuesday morning. That's because the fire happened on a Tuesday morning, back in June 1944. Right? Everyone thought it was accidental. Electrical failure, burning cigarettes tossed in a trash bin. But you knew better, right? You knew better because you set that fire, didn't you?"

He said nothing, but his hands tightened on the telephone. I went on. "The fire happened on June thirteenth, right? Just four days after the latest casualty lists were printed in the paper. A casualty list that included Raymond Gagnon. Your older brother. Killed in France."

Now he turned, looking straight at me. "You and your kind, you know nothing."

I nodded. "You're probably right."

"We fought and bled and died for the generations to come, so you wouldn't have to worry about secret police or cities being bombed or being sent away to a gas chamber. That's what we did for you, and how do you repay us? By using your freedom to get drugged up and watch filth on TV, and complain that the stock market isn't making enough money for you. Bah. The hell with you all. Makes me wish sometimes we'd get into another Depression, another big war, not this phony war on terrorism, so you can see what it was really like."

"Your brother, Raymond," I said, not rising to the bait. "That's what happened, right? You got word that he died and you saw a chance for revenge, a way to get back at—"

He raised a hand from the phone and made a dismissive motion towards me. "Oh, you make it sound so cold and conniving, don't you? The truth? You want to know the truth? I was seventeen years old, carrying a rifle almost as big as me. I was face-to-face, every day, with the enemy, with what we thought of as Nazis. Truth? Most of 'em were my age, that's right, my age, and were scared at being so far away from home. They didn't look so mean or so scary up close. So it was pretty easy duty. Just escortin' them back and forth to the farmers' fields or the forests. But then there

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came the news of Raymond . . ."

The old man looked out again to the parking lot. "My only brother. My best friend, really. My dad had died years earlier, so Raymond taught me how to fish and hunt and set traps out in the swamps for beaver. Older brothers sometimes get a kick out of raising hell against their younger brothers. Never Raymond. Oh, we had such grand plans, the two of us, when the war was going to be over. We were going into business for ourselves. Didn't matter what kind of business, we never got that far in talkin' about it, but what did matter is that we were going to stick together, the two of us, when the war was over."

I sat silently there, letting him talk, my notebook still safely shut on my lap. He went on. "Then . . . Mother got the telegram. Back then telegrams were delivered by taxi drivers. Always hated seeing taxi drivers in the neighborhood, 'cause you knew they were delivering bad news. Poor Raymond. Died the day after D-Day, in France. Oh, how Mother wept, and I did, too, though I kept it secret from her. I was the man of the house, you know . . . I wanted to show her how strong I was . . ."

The music overhead stopped for a moment, as a nurse was paged to report to the reception center. I cleared my throat and said, "What happened at the PW camp, then?"

A slight tremor of the body. "I was young, I was so sad, and so angry . . . Those boys in the camp, most of 'em were captured in Italy and North Africa. They had nothing personally to do with Raymond's death. . . . But one night, I heard them laughing and singing. You know why? They were happy that the invasion was on, 'cause they knew the war would be over and they'd be going home to their families, their mothers and fathers, their brothers. . . . I smoked back then . . . I had some matches. . . . That's all it took . . ."

He turned and looked back at me, his eyes moist. "The minute I set the fire, I regretted it, regretted it so much, Mr. Spooner. . . . Those wooden buildings went right up and I could hear them screaming inside, screaming as they were trapped. . . . I reported the fire and helped the firemen drag hoses there, but . . . Twenty-four . . . In the end, I killed twenty-four . . . But what else could I have done? They were laughing and singing while my brother's body was getting colder and colder in the mud of France. . . ."

I slowly opened up my reporter's notebook. "Then why the calls to the newspaper every Tuesday? Why were you doing that?"

A brief smile came over him, just for a moment. "A man gets to my age, your mind starts racing backward, starts remembering. I found I had to say something, confess to someone, so that I could sleep at night. And the local newspaper seemed to be the place to do it."

I uncapped my pen, started making a few notes, looking down at the notepad. "Well, here's a newspaper reporter right here, ready to hear the whole story again, Mr. Gagnon. So tell me how it all

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happened, right from the start."

His voice: "I'm afraid I can't do that. I'm afraid I won't let you."

I looked up, ready for a comment about the freedom of the press and the First Amendment and all that, but Mr. Gagnon was now practicing his rights under the Second Amendment, and was pointing a large pistol at me that he had pulled out from underneath his afghan.

"You see," he said, "I've lived here all my life. Raised a family. Became a supervisor in the mills and a selectman for twenty years in the town. This is my home, my place, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let some stranger humiliate me while I'm still alive."

And then he put the barrel of the pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

A half-hour later I was sitting in the rec room. The shakes in my legs were finally beginning to subside as Connie Simpson sat next to me, a clipboard in her lap, looking at me with concern.

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked.

I was embarrassed to say that seeing the gun pointed in my direction had caused me to soil myself, so I just quickly nodded and changed the subject. "It happened so quick, I couldn't do anything. . . . It was like I was nailed to that chair. Could not move."

She gave a reassuring touch to my shoulder. "Happens, facing a firearm for the first time."

I was still holding my reporter's notebook in my sweaty hands, and I thought that when I got back to the office, I would toss it away. "Well, when he put it in his mouth like that and pulled the trigger . . ."

"Your yells could be heard on the other side of the rest home. Which is how I got called here."

I stared down at the brightly polished linoleum. "Well, how was I supposed to know the damn thing was a toy? . . . It sure looked real."

I think she tried not to laugh at me. "This is a good retirement home, Jack. They wouldn't let him have a real weapon. It was just a toy, something his grandchildren would play with when they came. He was just messing with you, that's all. A cranky old man. Look, most of the people who live here and work here are locals, and everyone—"

I interrupted her. "I know, I know, around here, everyone looks out for everyone. Everyone knows everyone's history. Everybody knows damn everything except for those of us who haven't had the good fortune to have been born in Boston Falls."

There was a slight pause there, and Connie shifted a bit in her seat. "Look, you're still pretty shook up. How about I give you a ride? You want to go home?"

"No," I said. "Back to the office. I've got a couple of things to do."

On the short drive back to the bureau, I rolled down the window

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of the cruiser and just let the air cool my face. I was embarrassed and humiliated and angry all at once, a deep mix of emotions that outweighed the tiny triumph I had in finally nailing the story down, in learning what had really happened here more than sixty years ago, and in finding out who the mystery caller was.

When Connie pulled the cruiser up next to the sidewalk in front of the bureau office, I turned to her and said, "Space cadet."

She looked confused, and who could blame her. "Excuse me?"

"That's why I got exiled here," I said, feeling again that squishy, warm feeling that only comes from remembering how thoroughly I had screwed up. "Space cadet. Or, actually, *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet.* A big hit TV series during the nineteen fifties. A guy came to the Manchester office one afternoon, old guy. Said he had been one of the major characters in the show. Had old photos, scripts, memorabilia, stuff like that. Now lived by himself in a tiny one-room apartment in the West End. Not a very nice place to live. Any other newspaper might have done just a small story, but he talked to my boss, a fan of old science fiction and science fiction TV shows and movies. So I got the story and did it up big. Front page of the Sunday edition, about a hundred thousand readers. Sort of a Where Is He Now?, complete with heart-tugging photos of him living in one room with a fold-out couch and hot plate. A great story."

"What was the problem?"

Funny how that memory still made me wince. "The problem was that it was all made up. The guy had never been west of the Connecticut River in all his life. He had some mental problems, that's all. And I should have done a more thorough job in checking it out. But I didn't. I relied on his word and his memorabilia, and the disaster unfolded from there. Which explains my exile, and why I was working so hard to find a story to get me out of here."

She smiled. "I thought you were going to save telling me that story until I agreed to go out with you."

"I changed my mind." I got out and stepped onto the sidewalk.

She called out to me as I shut the door, "Are you still going to write that story? Still looking to get out?"

I pretended not to hear her.

Inside the bureau Rita was looking at me, as was Monty. Neither said anything as I went over to my desk and pulled out two things. The first was the official town history of Boston Falls that I had bought over the Internet. I walked past Monty's desk and let it drop there with a satisfying thump.

"There, Monty," I said. "Call it a little donation to the town library. I'm sure your friends there will be thrilled to get another edition of this hard-to-find book."

I think he was going to say something, but instead his phone started ringing and he picked it up, and his voice was sharp and

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low as he looked over at me. I went over to Rita, whose giggly face was now solemn, her reading glasses hanging from a thin chain around her neck.

"Saw your dad today," I said. "But he was too busy to send his regards."

"I see," she said, her voice faint.

I flipped through the second item I had brought from my desk. My phone log, which had carefully noted every phone call I had received from the Phantom Caller since day one.

"But then again, I should have realized right from the start that you knew him. You see, when he called, the first day I was working here, you just said, 'Oh, hold on,' and patched him through. And he knew me by name. Asked for Jack Spooner. But you and Monty were the only ones who knew I was coming to this bureau. It hadn't even been announced yet in the paper. But this mystery caller goes to you and asks for me by name, when he shouldn't have known a damn thing. So there you go."

"I . . . I . . . " she started, and I said, "And when I saw him this morning, I saw your photo up on his window sill. Very sweet. I'm sure you and Monty got a big chuckle out of him calling me every Tuesday, getting the new kid spun up. Probably never thought I'd get this far, right?"

"I couldn't stop him from calling," Rita said, her voice faint. "And I couldn't tell you, either."

Monty glared at me from his desk.

"Well, here's a helpful suggestion," I said, leaning over the counter. "Us out-of-towners, we're not all as dumb as you think."

Then I left.

That night I was alone on the back deck of my apartment, looking out over Tony's Towing and Auto Salvage. It had been a quiet night at the junkyard, and instead of gazing at the crumpled cars and trucks, I looked up to the hills and mountains surrounding Boston Falls. Funny thing about that. In all the time I had been here, not once had I gone up those trails, explored those woods. Not once. Just commuted between here and the bureau and the town halls and police stations of the surrounding towns.

I suppose I should have felt triumphant at what I had just done, in uncovering a story that would get me out of this town. But all I could think about was the old man alone in the last room of his life, still agonizing over something he did more than a half-century ago. What a way to live, with such burdens on your mind. And my job was to make that burden even worse, with an hour or two at the keyboard.

"Hey!" came a voice from the dirt parking lot beneath me. "Hey, Jack Spooner! You up there?"

"Nope," I called down, and there was a chuckle, and the sound of feet on the stairs. I looked over and nearly dropped my beer bottle.

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Police Chief Connie Simpson, in tight jean shorts, flat black shoes, and a white pullover top that looked mighty fine. It was the first time I had ever seen her out of uniform. In her hand she carried a plastic bag with handles, and I could smell cooked food.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Dinner," she said. "If you're hungry, and if you're interested."

Luckily for me there was a spare lawn chair on my deck, and the chief—okay, at this point, especially the way she was dressed, I was having a hard time thinking of her as the chief—sat down in it, dropping her plastic bag between us.

She eyed my open bottle of beer and said, "Interrupting anything special?"

"Nope, I was just sitting and thinking. And drinking. Just a little." I raised my bottle in the direction of the hills and mountains. "Thinking that in all the time I've been here, not once have I really explored this town. Just my place and the newspaper office and various police stations and town halls in the neighborhood."

Connie said carefully, "There are some wonderful trails up there with great views of the valley. I'll tell you more but we should eat before everything gets cold."

Dinner was barbequed ribs and French fries and lots of grease and fistfuls of napkins, and a few laughs along the way. Eventually we washed up in my tiny kitchen and reemerged onto the deck with small mugs of chocolate ice cream, and as we ate, Connie extended her long, tanned legs to the railing of my deck.

I tried not to stare and said, "Ask you a question?"

"Go right ahead."

"Didn't we just have dinner here? And haven't you always said no when it came to dinner? What's changed?"

She laughed, scooping up a dripping mess of ice cream to her mouth. "Yes, this was dinner, and what's changed is that you moved first. You told me that story about how you got in trouble with your editors. It seemed fair. And to hell with any gossipers out there."

"If I had known that, I would have confessed all the first time I met you."

She eyed me with amusement. "Then it probably wouldn't have worked. Now, time for a couple of questions from me."

"Fair is fair," I said, knowing pretty well what was coming up.

"The story about the PW camp and Paul Gagnon. Are you going to send it south to your editors?"

I suppose I should have felt insulted that a town official was trying to interfere with my work, but I was tired and said, "I haven't started writing it."

"You're not answering the question."

"Sorry, that's the best answer you're going to get. And here's a question for you."

"Go on."

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"The whole town knew about him and what he did back then?"

She paused for a moment, and said, "There've always been rumors here and there. But only that. Tales that no one really wanted to look into. . . . It was so long ago, Jack, and at such a different time."

"I see."

"If you did do a big story that got you transferred back to Manchester, would you get paid any more?"

The cold mug of ice cream felt good in my warm hands. "Nope. Though working out of such a large office would give me more opportunities to pad my expense account."

"Then why try so hard to go back? Just to run faster to stay ahead, is that it?"

I was going to launch into my usual explanation of stagnating in a small town versus the excitement of working out of the biggest city in the state, in a newspaper office that was the hub of the news media in the region, but with her looking at me and the quiet stillness of the night air, well, I just shrugged.

"Tell you the truth, Chief, I don't rightly know."

She nodded. "You know, this is a nice place. If you give it a chance. You ever think of that?"

I didn't reply, and we sat there for a few more minutes, and then we both put our empty ice cream mugs on the floor of the deck. I looked at her and she looked at me, and I spotted her hand, softly resting on the armrest of the lawn chair. I reached over and grasped it, and in a very confused few seconds, she ended up in my lap.

Long, long minutes later, we both came up for air, my lips tingling and my skin so sensitive I swear I could feel the rise in temperature around us.

Both of my hands were around the back of her neck, and I gently pulled her down towards me. "Not to sound too forward or anything, but is there a chance I might pay you back for dinner with breakfast anytime soon?"

"Mmm," she said. "How does tomorrow sound?"

Which is what I did that morning, and for many mornings after that. Along the way Rita and Monty and myself actually started talking to each other again, as if nothing had ever happened between us. It felt fine, though I found I did miss those Tuesday-morning phone calls, which had immediately stopped. Over the summer and through the fall, I did a lot more stories for the *Granite Times,* but none that would have been as exciting as the PW camp story.

I suppose I could have brooded over that, but I was too busy during those months, working in my apartment, unpacking all of those boxes, putting things away, sometimes with Connie's help.

I finally felt good. Like I belonged. Like I had made the right call. ●

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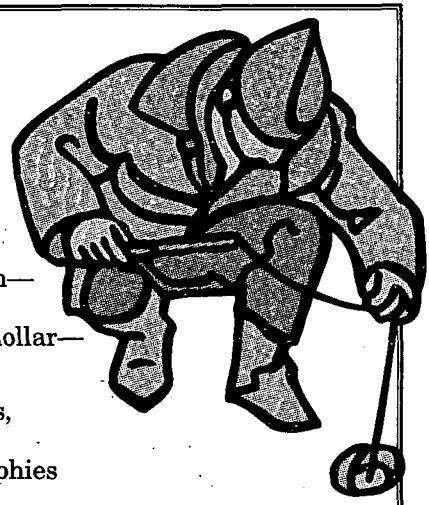
Ice Cube Trey

by Terry Lerdall-Fitterer

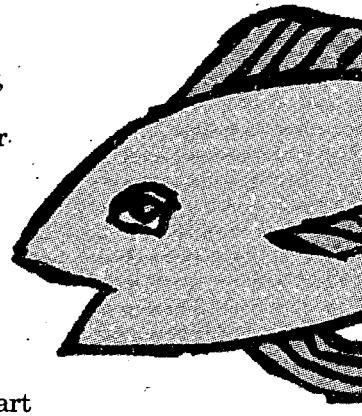


Trey and his cronies went fishing
On ice that was thickened by cold;
An auger, a saw, and some liquor
All help as this story unfolds.

All four of the gents had the passion—
They entered the contest that morn
Convinced they would win the top dollar—
Proceeding to toot their own horn.

Now, Trey, he excelled in maneuvers,
Could jiggle his line with finesse,
And never stopped boasting the trophies
Or mountings he came to possess.

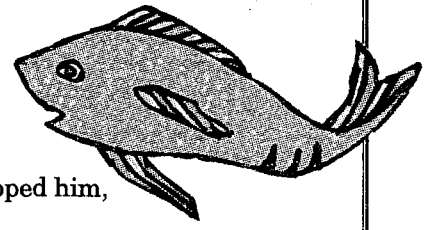
The other three winced at his bragging
And warned him to keep a tight lip,
So Trey went ahead with his fishing
And opened the jug for a nip.



By noon, the poor man was plain tipsy,
Let's say he was feeling sublime,
When suddenly jerks from down under
Had tightened the slack on his line.

A walleye the size of a Buick
Proceeded to burst through the ice;
The others were seething with envy,
Aware that this catch had a price.

As Trey was no longer coherent
(The brandy had taken its toll),
The friends could dispose of the braggart
Along with his tackle and pole.



The plot for the murder came easy—
A chunk of thick ice to the head—
For the evidence soon would be melted
And their rival most frozen and dead.

They chopped out a hunk and then bopped him,
Then measured his shoulders across,
Sawed into the lake with a fury,
And gave the dead body a toss.

They divvied the winnings between them,
No guilt did the blood money bring,
But each hooked a snag when Trey's body
Resurfaced the very next spring!

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

WHITHER COLUMBUS

by Gary Alexander

I had a hunch that the Christopher Columbus Symposium wasn't getting off to a real nifty start when one Ph.D. splashed a glass of perfectly good wine in the face of another Ph.D.

"Did you see that?" I asked Darla.

She shrugged, as ho-hum blasé as everybody else at this cocktail party. They'd also seen the two eggheads square off, voices rising, then *tsk-tsk*ed after the wine toss and went back to their gossip. This was normal college-professor behavior? Jeez, you'd think we were at a hockey game.

Where we were was the banquet room of our Madrid hotel. This get-together was the kickoff of the symposium. Yours truly and my Darla and a dozen others are gonna hop an ultra-high-speed train to Seville in the morning, to investigate whether ol' Chris's bones actually are at their big cathedral. The rest of the symposiumites are joining us down there.

Get this. Darla and the gang are attending on grants. Free cash money. Yeah, no kidding. They're being paid to hang out for a week, then go home and write long-winded papers saying, well, uh, er, maybe they're his bones, maybe they ain't.

"Do you have a problem with that?" she'd asked me.

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Since I was able to tag along on cut-rate airfare, and my grub and booze was on the house, my answer had been a resounding, "Hell no, I don't. Research has gotta go forward in order to make the world a sweller place."

Darla said, "A confrontation at some level between Chandler Bryce and Riley Neil was inevitable. Bryce is adamant that Columbus's bones are at the Catedral de Sevilla and Neil is equally convinced they aren't. They're fanatical on the issue and there isn't an ounce of compromise in either man."

A native of Washington state, Gary Alexander has the kind of imagination that takes him all over the world. Having spent a year in Viet Nam, he decided to invent a Pacific rim country for a series of novels featuring a police superintendent, the inimitable Bamsan Kiet. Like this new story set at a conference in Spain, the Kiet books are full of humor. †

Riley Neil and Chandler Bryce, wine slinger and wine slingee. Two overeducated pointy-heads with last names for first names and first names for last names. That's some heavyweight baggage to begin with. They were in their forties and had wire-rim glasses. They wore beards and those pants with the pockets up and down the sides. They could've been twins, except that the guy who tossed the wine was thin and short. The one with red stains was pear-shaped and a head taller. He'd gone stomping off out of the room, while the smaller guy took his empty glass to the bar for a refill, a little smirk on his face.

"Which one's been shooting off his mouth that he has these rare—whatchamacallit—documentationals?" I asked.

"Riley Neil. He claims to have conclusive proof that Columbus's bones are no longer in the Seville cathedral. He's going to present his evidence at the symposium. He claims that Francisco Franco, Spain's dictator, gave the bones to Benito Mussolini during World War Two. Christopher Columbus was Genoese. He was born in Genoa in 1451. Mussolini wanted his bones home. Franco was rewarding Il Duce for his support in the Spanish Civil War and for fending off Hitler's efforts to make Franco side with the Axis in World War Two.

"Neil boasts to have been paid a large advance from a publisher for a book on the subject. He has a lot to lose if his assertion is refuted. The consensus is that the documentation is a bluff and/or a fraud. Nobody's taking him seriously. The symposium hopes to clarify whether Columbus's remains *are* in the cathedral, regardless of Riley Neil's con game. Whither Columbus? That is the question."

It wasn't as if they were arguing something important, like the

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Super Bowl. I kept that insight to myself and asked Darla, "I get 'em mixed up. Cheap red wine was whose weapon of choice?"

"Riley Neil threw his on Chandler Bryce. They say Neil has an ugly temper."

"He definitely is a party pooper."

"Worse than that. Riley Neil has had a less than distinguished academic career and is hoping to damage those of others, besides becoming rich."

"Less than distinguished how? He got wrote up by the principal for leaving a dirty blackboard?"

"Much worse, Brick. He's *unpublished.* He's never written a word that made it into scholarly print. A controversy this old is unlikely to be conclusive, but scholars have devoted years in research and have written pallets full of paper on the topic. This is a new wrinkle he could exploit."

"And he's writing a book?"

"My eyebrows lifted, too, when I heard."

"Any of these other people hopping on the publish-or-perish bandwagon?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. If you have such plans, you play it cool so no one else gets a jump on you."

I was drinking Spanish beer out of the bottle. The bartender was chipping ice to go into a pitcher of sangría. The symposiumites were chatting in small groups like junior high school cliques. Ah, the genteel world of the halls of ivy.

"Riley Neil is a jerk," Darla added with a loathing that startled me. She didn't have a nasty bone in her luscious body.

"You said they teach at rival colleges in the same town."

"I did say. The schools constantly attempt to one-up each other in terms of academic prestige."

"Who has the best football team?"

Darla rolled her eyes at me and said, "Chandler Bryce teaches a creative writing section, too, and has had a few short stories published in obscure literary magazines."

"Must make Riley Neil insecure, huh?"

"My thoughts exactly."

"I count my lucky stars I'm in the kinder and gentler world of snooping lowlife riffraff on the mean streets and at hot-sheet motels, instead of this shark pool you college profs swim around in," I said.

In case you didn't notice, that's where we were treading water now. All you had to do is read the nametags. According to his, the uncongenial Riley Neil was *HI. I'M RILEY NEIL, PH.D.* Everybody had their sheepskin tacked on to their names. Everybody but yours truly, whose higher education is courtesy of GCIPD, the Gumshoe Correspondence Institute of Private Detection. If there was any more tweed in the room, I'd be itching.

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Just for the hell of it, I grease-penciled *PE* by *HI. I'M BRICK BATES.* PE stands for Private Eye.

Darla is *HI. I'M DARLA HOGAN, MA.* She wouldn't let me add *LOVE OF MY LIFE.* Darla teaches anthropology at a community college. She's a little slip of a woman with big hair and bigger glasses. She has got the sweetest leer.

Some of these la-di-da Ph.D.s look down their noses at her because she only has her master's and doesn't teach at a four-year school. That pisses me off a lot more than it does her. Darla teaches a history section called New World Conquest 261. She's tickled pink to be invited to Spain for this affair.

I'm one of the few significant anothers. Darla said she didn't know much about her colleagues' personal lives other than that some were single or divorced. She said that some were "too career oriented to nurture a relationship." Sounds to me like they're candidates for daytime TV talk shows.

"I looked up 'symposium' in the dictionary," I told Darla. "It comes from the Latin for drinking party."

"My, my. Scholarly curiosity."

"That's my middle name."

Another lady in the group moseyed on over.

"Yuck," Dr. Mary Beth Lambuth said, making a face at Riley Neil, who was standing at the bar by his lonesome, swigging his wine refill. "Was he raised by wolves?"

Dr. Lambuth was a tall, husky blonde. I could picture her carved in the prow of a Viking warship. Darla said she was an expert on the history of written communication and had knocked out an outline for a book that was with a New York literary agent, who'd had a nibble or two.

"He isn't subtle," Darla said diplomatically.

"You'll find out how unsubtle if you get caught in a dark hallway with him."

Darla didn't answer, but her grip on her wineglass got so white-knuckled, I thought it was gonna pop like a light bulb. Another member of our merry band swung by before we could expand on that theme.

Dr. Edwin Dobbs said, "I caught the drift. The man surely could use some manners."

Darla said that after years in Romance Languages, teaching Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, Dobbs now lectured on European history. She says he's a polymath, whatever that is. Dobbs looks like Burl Ives. Darla said he made his bones, pun intended, on the life of Columbus. Even had a book out on Chris, with this catchy title: *Columbus: A Critical Study on His Origins, Path of Discovery, and Final Years.* Darla said it was published by the University of Northeast Nevada A&M Press or some such and made no bestseller lists. Scuttlebutt had it that Dr. Dobbs just

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completed a whirlwind romance, marriage, and divorce to his second wife, a freckle-faced young teaching assistant, and was hurting big-time for bucks. He was the symposium's numero-uno Columbus authority and was slated to conduct panels and workshops.

Mary Beth Lambuth said, "Riley Neil is an intellectual bully."

No argument there. Dobbs gave a sourpuss nod of agreement and went to the bar. That seemed like a stellar idea. We did the same. By then Riley Neil had skedaddled. We had us a nice, dull cocktail party. Thanks to severe jet lag and nothing else to gossip about, the shindig broke up early as I was gazing at and then grazing on the tapas they'd laid out.

"Tapa" is Spanish for appetizer, part of Spain's cultural heritage, and appetizing they were. Tapas bars are all over Spain, so says our guidebook. I was making a cultural tour of sausage chunks and slivers of ham and meatballs and olives and the omelet slices they call tortillas and prawns and other critters and toast wedges and—when Darla dragged me off. Before I burst, she said.

Up in our room, looking out at buildings older than El Cid, I asked Darla, "How fast did you say this rolling rocket we're taking to Seville goes?"

"Bricklin Bates, stop asking me that same question."

"Bullet train. I don't even like the word."

"Bullet?"

"Train. You know how often they jump the tracks at a safe and sane speed, let alone at Mach Three?"

"Bullet train is a generic term for a high-speed train," Darla patiently explained. "This is the AVE, pronounced *ah-veigh. Alta Velocidad Española* or Spanish High Velocity. Two hundred and eighty kilometers per hour."

"How fast is that in plain English?"

She hooked her arm to mine. "One hundred and seventy-four miles per hour. There is absolutely nothing to be afraid of."

Darla Hogan had thought I was fearless. Until now. Must be crushingly disillusioning to her.

She'd been stalked by her ex-boyfriend. The restraining order wasn't worth the paper it was written on, so she let her fingers do the walking and hired me. My esteemed competition was listed as Security Consultants and Professional Investigators, wimpy crapola like that. I was the only dick listed under Private Eye. That's how we met.

She wanted me to track the sicko and dig up dirt that would land him in the pokey. Trouble was, he was squeaky clean. He lived with his mother, taught Sunday school, and was secretary-treasurer of the local orchid society. He didn't do diddly except follow Darla around like a demented puppy and call her at all hours.

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I knew the type. One fine day, he'd go berserk. Then he'd be a model prisoner on death row.

I flipped for Darla, and took her and her case deep inside my heart. I stalked the freakoid as he stalked her. One night, while he was parked across the street from her apartment, I decided enough already.

I snuck up on him and took the law into my own hands, as well as various bodily parts that I used as handles to immobilize him with. I never told Darla what I did to him afterward, and I ain't spilling the beans to you, either, other than that our boy lives with a maiden aunt on the opposite coast and is eligible to try out for the Vienna Boys' Choir.

"Says you. It's perfectly normal to be afraid of flying, especially if you're not leaving the ground."

"Darla, didn't you tell me that nobody knows what Christopher Columbus looks like?"

I dropped Chris's name to keep my mind off the planet blurring by outside. It wasn't hard to get Darla going on Columbus.

This AVE bullet car we were in was *preferente* class, which is like first class on a plane. We've got ample hip- and legroom, one row of seats on one side of the aisle, two on the other, and cute young stews serving snacks. They even wheeled a duty-free shopping cart through and are showing an in-flight movie. As if I needed all these reminders that we're moving like a bat outta hell.

Edwin Dobbs and Mary Beth Lambuth shared a table on the two-seat side, sitting across from each other. The antagonists were in opposite corners, Riley Neil behind us by the luggage racks, Chandler Bryce up front.

What really set my teeth on edge were the trains passing the other direction *inches* from us. Our train shuddered and so did I. If there was a derailment, we'd be locking antlers at three hundred and fifty mph.

"That's correct, Brick. Christopher Columbus never had his portrait painted and written descriptions run the gamut. Many perceive him as blue-eyed, red-haired, and tall."

"I hope he used sunscreen. I guess that rules out those clay build-ups of the skull the forensics teams do. Hey, how about DNA?"

Darla ignored my helpful hint. "You can debate absolutely every aspect of his life and death."

I said, "All I know is, in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

"Christopher Columbus got around almost as much in death as in life," she said. "He died in Valladolid, Spain, in 1506 at the age of fifty-four. In 1507 he was moved to Seville. In 1537, he was moved again to Santo Domingo. People in the Dominican Republic insist his bones are still there, but in 1795, off he went to the

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Cathedral of Havana. Then in 1899, he sailed back to Spain, eventually to his final resting spot in 1902. Considering the timespan and the shifting of his remains, it's problematic whether any or all of the bones are his."

She had my pinhead spinning. "So I'm fuzzy on what you guys plan to accomplish at your symposium."

"We'll have a look at the litter serving as his tomb. That will be exciting in itself. We'll share information and research and, who knows, it's a long shot, but there may be a stone left unturned. Some of us speak Spanish and one person knows Latin. Hopefully there are accessible archives. You being a detective, Brick, doesn't that stimulate your curiosity?"

"We're talking a trail that went cold a hundred years ago. And who pays my hourly fee? Refresh me on the sordid details of Riley Neil's allegedly alleged transfer of the alleged old bones."

"Hitler was pressuring Franco to declare war against the Allies. He wanted access to Gibraltar. Franco argued that Spain was an economic basket case because of the Spanish Civil War that had recently ended. This was true. Franco gave the Germans an impossibly extravagant shopping list before he'd go to war. Hitler figured it was a means of dodging participation.

"Hitler asked Mussolini to intercede. Franco and Mussolini met in February 1941 at Bordighera on the Italian Riviera. Franco supposedly brought Columbus's bones. Franco continued vacillating on entering the war and Spain remained neutral, as she did throughout. Mussolini, for his part, reported to Hitler that Spain was too impoverished to be a military asset and recommended dropping the idea altogether."

"I like the bribery and payoff possibilities. They speak to me. But Riley Neil's saying that the bones changed hands. Hogwash, huh?"

Darla nodded. "Neil claims that Franco ingratiated himself with Il Duce with the gift. Mussolini had imperial delusions that he was leading the Second Roman Empire. Anything that lent splendor to the trappings was fair game. Riley theorizes that Mussolini was going to display Columbus's remains in the Genoa Cathedral after the Axis won the war."

"No bones?"

"I don't believe it could have happened."

"Why?"

"Franco and the Archbishop of Sevilla had a mutual enmity. The cathedral was the only one in Spain that didn't have Falangist graffiti and displays commemorating the soldiers who fought in the Spanish Civil War for the Nationalists, Franco's side. The archbishop would have raised a fuss."

"What if he didn't know? What if they were slipped out a window in the dead of night or a switcheroo was done, money under

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the table?"

Darla didn't have an answer. These college profs, I tell ya, they need a more cynical edge to get to the bottom of things.

"My priceless documents! They're gone!"

We turned around to see Riley Neil rummaging through bags on the rack, flinging them every which way, tearing through one of his suitcases.

"Who stole them?" he yelled. "I demand their immediate return!"

The washrooms were across from the luggage racks. I was about to tell Neil to throw some cold water on his face and simmer down, that we needed to go step by step, but he was steaming by me, shaking a fist, raving, "You pusillanimous sneak. You ersatz academician!"

Chandler Bryce rose clumsily to his feet, bug-eyed, looking like a punching bag waiting to happen.

Bryce countered with, "How dare you, you pseudointellectual, self-aggrandizing hypocrite!"

This was how these people cussed when their noses were outta joint? I waded in, a step ahead of Dobbs, Lambuth, and a couple of Spaniards whose movie the boys were interrupting.

"Break it up," I snarled, lunging between them.

"I was seated before you came aboard, Neil, and I have not moved," Bryce said. "I didn't touch your luggage or this chimerical document of yours."

"We shall see, Bryce," Neil said, wagging a finger. "This crime shall come to light."

"Ding, ding," I said firmly, hands extended to their chests. "Go to your neutral corners."

Though I don't think the boys caught my prizefighting metaphor, Bryce took his seat and Neil headed back to his. It was almost too easy to keep the pointy-heads separated, but I was relieved. I had to wonder too why the hell, if this documentation was so priceless, Neil had it in a bag, unlocked, to his rear.

I followed him, saying, "Neil, you better clue us in as to what this package looks like so we can conduct a search. I mean, is it bigger than a breadbox?"

"*Doctor* Neil, to you."

"Spare me the attitude, pal. You already got a serious problem."

Darla had me by the arm before I could do something rash, like escort him to the outdoor observation deck this bullet train didn't have. Mary Beth Lambuth was right behind Darla, saying, "He's right, Riley. You need to be a bit less cryptic if you expect assistance recovering your property."

Neil scowled and said, "Very well. It is a manilla envelope a quarter of an inch thick. It contains coded Teletype messages between Madrid and Rome, which I have had decoded at no small expense. The bulk of the material is correspondence between

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Franco's and Mussolini's foreign ministers, respectively Ramón Serrano Súñer and Count Galeazzo Ciano. Serrano Súñer was Franco's brother-in-law and Ciano was Mussolini's son-in-law, so confidentiality was presumed. In addition, there is a subsequent, albeit vague, thank-you note from Mussolini to Franco, expressing 'gratitude for the righting of a historic anomaly.'"

Well, it would be hard to mistake the contents of that manilla envelope for anything else. We went through the bags in the car one by one, with the owners present, even the Spaniards. We looked in the overhead racks and the washroom, too. Nada. Zilch.

Everybody sat back down. Our train had pulled out of Madrid at eight A.M. sharp. We were due in at Seville at ten-twenty. I glanced at my watch: nine-forty. "You didn't notice Bryce go by us in the aisle earlier?" I asked Darla.

"I didn't."

"We've gone through some tunnels."

"Brick, the lights didn't go out and even if they had, we were through those tunnels in seconds."

I twitched, reminded again of our terminal velocity. "I know, I know, I know. I was testing you."

"Riley Neil was convincing," Darla said.

"The whys and wherefores of his documentation? Yeah, but if you rehearse any story long enough, it rings genuine even if it's pure, unadulterated guano."

"Someone from the next car could have stolen the papers. Someone could have torn the paper into small pieces and flushed them."

"You're buying his bill of goods, kiddo," I said sadly.

"Brick, you are such a cynic."

"That's the sweetest thing you've said to me all day."

Finally, at long, long last, half an hour later, the train began slowing. We were coming in for a landing at Seville's Santa Justa station. The conductors opened the doors and I exhaled a deep breath. Then, suddenly, our car was swarming with cops. They had a word with the conductor and let the Spaniards go. They detained us symposium types.

This outfit was the *policía nacional,* the national police. They wore dark and formal uniforms with white shirts and ties. They were polite, but highly perturbed. I thought they were just being anti-American, a popular sport worldwide. Dobbs talked to them, Darla and her so-so Spanish listening in.

"What's going on?" I asked her. My Spanish was limited to *Otra cerveza, por favor.*

"The Seville cathedral received a telephone call this morning stating that Columbus's bones had been stolen last night. A ten-million-euro ransom was demanded," Darla said. "The receptacle containing the bones, the litter, didn't appear to have been disturbed."

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"Have they opened it up?"

"Apparently not yet. There is a dispute among officialdom about disturbing the bones, as it may well be a hoax. They surmise that if the crime occurred, it was an inside job, cleaning people during the night or guards paid to ignore the activity. Every employee on duty yesterday is being interviewed. So far they have no solid information and have made no arrests."

"What do they know of the caller?"

"He spoke in Spanish, but they think he's a foreigner, possibly an American."

An old saying of mine: Nature abhors a coincidence. Our symposium arriving just after this alleged crime happened, to research the allegedly purloined bones. You couldn't blame the law for being a tad suspicious. They took our statements with a translator.

They went through our luggage again and found no missing bones, and no missing documents.

At the hotel, Darla said, "You have your credentials, don't you, Brick? In case anybody asks."

Besides my certificate from the Gumshoe Correspondence Institute of Private Detection, I received a snazzy silver badge. It was a five-pointed star like lawmen wore in the old Westerns. Those points caused me no end of grief at airport security and Darla, once in a rare snide mood, had said it looked like it came out of a cereal box.

"Never leave home without them," I said. "Why would anybody ask?"

"Well, it has been suggested that we in the symposium conduct a parallel investigation and that you are eminently qualified. We wish to have our names cleared, individually and as a group. Not everyone was enthusiastic, but nobody raised an objection. In fact, Ed Dobbs, who first proposed the investigation, asked me to ask you if you would take on the job for an honorarium."

My eyes widened as I rubbed thumb against forefingers. "Is an honorarium like a grant?"

"Kind of a mini-grant, an amount to be negotiated."

"And if I find a member of your symposium under a rock?"

"Let the chips fall where they may."

I raised my right hand, deputizing myself, threw my left around Darla, kissed her, and said, "Let's start at the scene of the crime. I'm ready for some heavy-duty culturalizing."

The Christopher Columbus Symposium had grown to thirty and lurched forward on schedule. The plainclothes police were damn near living with us, one casually looking the other way or at his newspaper whenever you turned around, but nobody was taken downtown or otherwise detained.

I knew zip about this city in advance, except the old Bugs Bunny

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cartoon where he sang "The Barber of Seville." This cathedral they have got, though, if you're ever in town, don't miss it. The Seville cathedral is old and gingerbread-ornate and bigger than a domed stadium. You wear off a half-mile of shoe leather walking the perimeter. It's got eighty-one stained-glass windows, seventy domes, and twenty-five chapels. What's up above you is supported by thirty-two columns, some one hundred and eighty feet tall.

Oh yeah, it sports a three-hundred-foot-high bell tower and an enclosed patio that has an orchard's worth of producing orange trees.

There's plenty of room for Chris's bones and there they allegedly are, soon after you enter. These four bronze and alabaster guys in frilly outfits that make you wonder a little about them, they're holding up a litter that looks like a breadbox made of dark wood and leather. What made the monument strangely modern was the yellow crime-scene tape and the armed and uniformed cops on guard, up-close and personal.

"What's the point? The horse is long gone from the corral," I told Darla.

"Perhaps," she said.

While the gang went off to their Columbus Symposium lectures and panels and workshops, I took the grand tour of the Seville cathedral again. I hung out at Chris's exhibit so long that I was attracting attention, so I just wandered, thinking how hard it'd be to snatch anything in the cathedral, day or night, and sneak it out.

When the eggheading was done for the day, I cut Darla from the herd and we went to dinner.

Over the first course, she said, "The cathedral received another call, repeating the ransom demand, warning that he'd turn the bone into ash unless the ransom money was raised immediately."

I slurped my gazpacho, which is Spanish for vegetable soup they forgot to warm up. "I'll bet that hasn't happened."

She nodded. "There's a debate in progress as to whether to open the coffin and how to do it without disturbing the remains that may or may not be inside."

"Looked to me like all anybody's done lately is dust it. You'd need to pay a bunch of people to go temporarily blind."

"A highly unlikely caper," Darla agreed.

"Okay, to do my job, I need a process of elimination."

"To prove one of us didn't do it or collaborate, if indeed it was done at all?"

"Yeah. Maybe killing the two birds with one lucky rock. Of course, we have got one prime suspect, Riley Neil. What do you think, Darla?"

"I'm coming around to your dark thinking pattern. I wouldn't be surprised if Neil planned to withdraw his quote-unquote documentation at the last minute, saying it deserved a bigger and bet-

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ter forum. The alternative of its mysterious disappearance is very convenient. Not to mention the distraction at the cathedral."

"Who hates Riley Neil more than anybody?"

"It's a long list, but sure, Chandler Bryce."

"I'm gonna play a little good cop-bad cop," I said. "The roast suckling pig we ordered, it'll be heated up, won't it?"

In the morning, I intercepted Dr. Chandler Bryce on his way to breakfast. I asked him to stroll around the block with me, promising to keep it brief, as he struck me as the type to get grouchy if he missed a meal.

"What's Dr. Neil's shtick, Dr. Bryce?"

He chuckled. "Shtick. I find that word mildly offensive, even when applied to that unseemly individual."

Excuuuuuse me. "You and Dr. Neil teach in the same town at different schools. How'd you get along before the wine drenching? You guys weren't competing for a different job, a big step up, department head at his college or yours, or whatever?"

"We got along coolly yet cordially. And he was no competition in any regard before his stunt with the illusory document. He has lost any scintilla of credibility."

"I'm with you, Doc, and between you and me and the gatepost, I think he's behind this missing-bones business, too."

Bryce chuckled again. "He's ambitious, certainly, but he lacks the audaciousness to be a criminal. Riley tends to play devil's advocate about virtually everything, in the ugliest, most gleeful sense of the phrase. If you can challenge another's scholarship, you need not persevere yourself. Neil is a fraud and a revisionist historian."

"Pretty tough words, Doc, not that I blame you, from what I've seen of him. Mind telling me what your professional interests are?"

"I am an historian and an educator."

"This book deal Neil has, is that out the window now that the alleged documents have been allegedly snatched?"

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Bates."

We were stopped at a light. How they drive in Spain, it's best you wait for the green. "Is Neil a pretty good writer? I mean, good enough to write an entire book?"

Dr. Chandler Bryce snorted. "He couldn't write a grocery list."

"I'm getting confused signals synapsing in my brain like pinballs," I told Darla in our room after breakfast as she loaded her briefcase for the day's eggheading.

"I don't believe 'synapse' has a verb form, Brick."

"It does now."

"What about your interview with Chandler Bryce bothers you so much?"

"He's not pissed off enough. He doesn't hate Neil enough."

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"Brick, not everybody resolves disputes and resentments with fists and bloodshed."

"Maybe we oughta. If you have a fat lip, you're more inclined to listen to reason."

Darla sighed.

I said, "The situation doesn't mesh. It's haywire."

"Brick, stop pacing."

"I'm a detective, Darla. My brain and feet have a direct link."

"I don't know what that means, but if you're thinking of interviewing Riley Neil, that's not going to happen. I couldn't tell you earlier, but Ed Dobbs took me aside and said he's refusing to cooperate further with anyone who isn't official."

"That may mean he's hiding something or he isn't or he wants us to think he is."

Darla kissed me and said, "It's going to be a long day and I already have a headache."

It was gonna be a long day for me, too. I had nary a glimmer of what my next step would be. Seville's a spiffy old town full of churches, museums, and narrow winding streets. I set a course westward for their big river, the mighty Guadalquivir, and eventually made it. I walked along the downtown side and went to a café.

It was nice and sunny, so I sat outside. I had me a tapas feast, some of the goodies I had in Madrid, and also sampled artichoke hearts and mushrooms sautéed in olive oil. As I washed the tapas down with cold suds, I whipped out our guidebook. I almost fell outta my chair when I came to a page that had a blurb on El Rinconcillo. It was only three blocks from our hotel!

What's El Rinconcillo, you ask? Only the birthplace of the tapa, is all. El Rinconcillo's said to date to 1670 and while the guidebook's sceptical that the tapa was invented there, hey, like Columbus's bones, either you got faith or you don't. I had faith. I had a carload of faith. I was a true believer.

I'm pretty good at reading maps, even if I get myself slightly misplaced afterward. This town, the street layout's like a bowl of spaghetti. I began back, to pilgrimage on over to El Rinconcillo, a holy and sacred site. When I saw the river for the third time, I gave up and caught a taxi.

El Rinconcillo was an ordinary Spanish saloon, not new, but not that medieval-looking, either. The guys behind the bar were friendly and served ice-cold beer on tap. I'd worked up an appetite getting misplaced. The tapas were mostly in the saturated-fat family: Serrano ham, chorizo sausage, cheese. Yum.

I had my Bryce-Neil itch to scratch and it was getting itchier by the minute. El Rinconcillo was my inspiration. It was the ideal, perfect venue.

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Darla was none too thrilled by my request, but she agreed to slip a note under Riley Neil's door, asking him to meet her at eight-thirty at El Rinconcillo. I did the same with Chandler Bryce. I saw Mary Beth Lambuth in the hall and a plot aspect thickened in my head. I asked her, "Any good news from your agent?"

"We're hopeful."

"How'd you like to make a status check with her, among other things, and join us for a party tonight?"

I arrived at El Rinconcillo fifteen minutes early and positioned myself in a back corner, outfitted with sunglasses and a *Real Madrid* baseball cap. They're this famous soccer team and my shades were wraparounds. You'd never guess I was on surveillance. Euro tourists of some flavor were guzzling wine at the bar and the joint was filling up with locals. The dinner hour comes late in this country, getting into full swing when at home I'd be rooting around in the fridge for a bedtime snack.

In bopped Riley Neil. He stood at the end of the bar, head on a swivel, an eager beaver. Not two minutes later, Chandler Bryce appeared. Their eyeballs met. They were flabbergasted, flummoxed, but recovered fast. I could tell by their slippery body language that no fur was gonna fly. That was my case in a nutshell!

They'd smelled a rat and decided to scram, but I popped up and beat them to the door.

"Mr. Bates," Chandler Bryce said.

I removed my cap and shades. "Don't go away mad or thirsty, gents. I'm buying the drinks."

"No, thank you," Bryce said.

"I saved us a table," I said.

"We have no comment," Riley Neil said.

"That's the first thing you've said to me lately, Neil," I said, gesturing to my table. "It's a start and this ain't a request. C'mon!"

I ordered a fresh brew for me and, knowing their libational preferences, red wine for them. I let them stew till our drinks arrived.

"What tipped off my subconscious was that stunt on that AVE bullet rocket train," I said, getting right to the nitty-gritty. "Neil, you just happened to open your luggage and howl like a banshee, and Bryce, like on orchestral cue, you said you hadn't touched his luggage. I doubt if you'd even turned your head around. How'd you know where he kept this phony-baloney document, and why would he keep it out of his sight, with easy access, if it was so valuable?"

Before they could answer, which they weren't gonna anyhow, I wrote on a napkin: C+C=C.

"Know what that means?"

"Faulty algebra," Neil said, his irritating smirk plastered on his puss like a decal.

"Conspiracy plus Controversy equals Crime. We devoted a whole

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lesson to that fact of life in my GCIPD studies."

"Is that a grad-school program?" Bryce asked. "I'm not familiar with the institution."

"The University of Hard Knocks, you might say. You boys were just too easy to separate during your altercation, too. And, hats off, the wine-tossing at the party was damn clever. You had me fooled.

"Professor Doctor Neil, you have got a big-time book deal going. You're unpublished. Professor Bryce, he is, sort of. By the way, Neil, Bryce says you can't write a grocery list, his words. But you go and get a big fat advance from a book publisher. Bryce, that must be a tough pill to swallow. And Neil, who's gonna write this book of yours for you?"

I paused. I'd provoked these pointy-headed brainiacs five ways to Sunday. They were giving me the stinkeye and looking sidelongingly at each other.

"Now, let's make something perfectly clear," I snarled. "If anybody's thinking of wine as a projectile and me as the primary target, he's gonna be staring up at the ceiling, counting the constellations in the Milky Way."

Riley Neil sipped his wine and squinted his weasel eyes at me. Chandler Bryce was tense, rigid as a statue, playing it not nearly so cool. I concentrated on him. "This bogus documentation of Neil's, it can't help but hype book sales. Some people will always believe in it. It oughta be easy for a veteran fiction writer-teacher to whip out a manuscript. If there're objections to the facts, hey, the proof, Neil's papers, they were ripped off on the train, not his fault."

"Conjecture," Bryce said.

"You're postulating that if a nonexistent document was perceived to be purloined, therefore it exists. How quasi-empirical of you, Mr. Bates."

"Riley," Chandler Bryce said.

Neil raised his hand to Bryce's objection. "Merely enjoying a spot of rhetoric, Chandler."

I said, "Kinda like if a tree falls in the woods, does it make a sound if nobody hears it?"

"Precisely," Neil said.

"So what you're doing is playing a con game to make a few bucks. No harm, no foul. You could even do point-counterpoint in the book. Did Mussolini or didn't he cut a deal with Franco? Were the bones Chris's in the first place? And what's in the litter in the cathedral? Or did the bones stay back in the Dominican Republic? A triple and quadruple whammy. It'd keep the readers off balance, turning pages."

Bryce had relaxed enough to smile and wipe the sweat off his forehead.

Neil raised his glass in toast. "An intriguing series of speculative and cabalistic projections."

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"You boys've stirred up a helluva hornet's nest over the disappeared bones. You've mobilized Spain. Chris Columbus is a national treasure."

"You're accusing us of telephoning the ransom demands?"

I shrugged. "Nature abhors a coincidence."

"I'm fluent in French," Neil said.

"That figures," I said, working up a smirk of my own.

"And I have a workable knowledge of German," Bryce said.

"I don't speak fifty words of Spanish," Neil said, smirk straightening into a grin.

"Nor I," Bryce said. "You can check, Mr. Detective."

Mary Beth Lambuth and Darla entered El Rinconcillo right on cue. I waved them over, moved two chairs to our table, and said, "Gee, ladies, what a pleasant surprise."

"How transparent of you, Bates," Riley Neil said.

Mary Beth was giving him such an evil eye, he had to avert his.

"What did you find out?" I asked her.

"Much. My literary agent made an inquiry and learned that there are two author signatures on Riley's book proposal. His and Chandler's."

"A partnership that is none of your concern," Chandler Bryce said.

"Say no more, Chandler," Riley Neil said.

"Chandler the friendly ghost writer," I said.

"There's more," Darla said.

"Riley," Mary Beth said. "You stated on the train that the majority of your documentation was Teletype messages between Spain's and Italy's foreign ministers. Spain's infrastructure was in ruins after their civil war. They didn't have Teletype service in operation in early 1941."

Without a word of rebutment, Riley Neil marched out, trailed like a big shaggy dog by Chandler Bryce. The gals ordered brewskis too and we toasted our scam.

"I have a confession," Mary Beth Lambuth said. "My performance was a half-truth. The call to my agent was not a fabrication. They are collaborators on the book. The Teletype story was merely that."

"Spain had Teletype service then?"

Mary Beth shrugged wide silky shoulders. "I haven't the foggiest. It wasn't part of my research, but I imagine they did. The first mechanical Teletype was employed in 1867. It was not a new technology."

In our room, Darla confirmed that Bryce and Neil were telling the truth about their knowledge of foreign languages. "The academic achievements of the symposium members are on record."

It was my turn to have a headache. Pacing, I said, "Maybe they took a crash course, you know, those tapes you listen to in the car."

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"Brick."

"Maybe they hired a bilingual Spanish lowlife to make the calls. Slipped him fifty euros to speak Spanish in a fake American accent."

"Brick."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. It's a reach. What frustrates the hell out of me, they're in cahoots on the book, but I can't prove the missing papers are fake. And the extortion phone calls, I don't doubt for a minute they masterminded them. This is a big-time criminal beef that could stop them in their tracks, and I can't prove a damn thing there, neither."

Darla said, "We can only hope that their book contract will be canceled when word spreads of their deception."

She was red in the face. I knew she was wishfully thinking. I put my arms around her and patted her back. "Take it easy, Darla. That's all well and good, but I flopped. I solved a piddly little flim-flam I can't prove. Meanwhile, Chris's bones are on the loose or they ain't. So whodunit?"

"Anybody. Terrorists, generic criminals, telephone pranksters."

"Until I nail the creeps or prove your symposiumonians are non-creeps, I'm not earning my honorarium, as generous as it may be."

"The spirit of your assignment is to eliminate symposium members as suspects," Darla said. "Or not."

"Who else've you come across who might be suspicious?"

"Nobody. We are a serious and scholarly group who spend our days poring over papers and debating their meanings and merits."

Yawn, I thought. "Darla, how about Professor Dobbs? Your polyglot or polygon or polynomial. You said this little cookie he was married to took him to the cleaner's. He's hurting for bucks, isn't he?"

"Polymath. Oh, Brick, Ed's a teddy bear and what motive could he have? None of us earn a fortune, so we could *all* be suspected for mercenary reasons. And don't forget, Ed Dobbs proposed securing your services and supported me in the effort."

"Doc Dobbs has got no other motive that I know of, but my detective instincts say I oughta go snoop for one."

The next day, the symposium met in this old stucco-and-red-tile house a ten-minute taxi ride from the hotel. It'd been converted into a private library and our group was given permission to pore over some moldy papers. There was a tapas bar directly across from it. I saw that as an omen that my luck was gonna do a one-eighty.

Our plan was for Darla to invite Dr. Edwin Dobbs on over for morning coffee. I waited, enjoying a savory selection of tapas of the cholesterol persuasion with my java. There was no law saying I had to have a blueberry muffin.

They came in and Darla said, "Ed's panel, *The Elemental Columbus: Businessman and Explorer,* was wonderful."

"Cool," I said.

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"Darla tells me you have a progress report," Dobbs said to me as they sat.

"I've been working closely with the *policía.* We may be near a breakthrough," I lied.

"Excellent," Dobbs said, munching a pastry. "May I ask what?"

"Kind of like Nixon and the White House tapes, they just learned that the Seville cathedral automatically records all phone calls. The cops are bragging that their voiceprint setup is second to none."

"Voiceprint?" Dobbs said. "The technology that matches a person to a voice?"

"There you go. It's on the same principle as fingerprints. They detect X number of points and it's gotcha."

I raised my voice for "gotcha," and if my eyes weren't tricking me, Dr. Edwin Dobbs flinched.

I whipped out this cheesy little tape recorder I'd bought on my way there and said, "Darla, you go first."

Dobbs laughed. "Wasn't the caller male?"

I looked at him.

"Was that ever made clear?" I asked, aware that it was. He didn't answer or hold my gaze. "A voice can be big-time disguised. Darla, please."

"And say what, Brick?"

"Don't matter as long as you talk for forty to sixty seconds," I said, winging it and checking my watch. "That's what the computer software says you gotta do."

Darla recited one of those love poems by what's-her-name, that Dickinson or Dickerson gal. She liked to rattle them off to me at night when we were snuggling. Don't know what they mean, but they sure are pretty.

"Thanks, Darla. Professor Dobbs," I said, aiming the machine at him. "You're up."

Dobbs slapped a plump paw on my recorder. "No, not yet. I approve of your initiative and will cooperate fully. The testing will be counterproductive, however, unless done under controlled conditions with the proper law-enforcement authorities present."

"Well, okay, yeah. Hey, I was just trying to get a jump on the situation. The cops are taking the slant that Bryce and Neil paid somebody in the symposium to make the calls, to hype book sales. I'm meeting with detectives this afternoon. They indicated they'd like to get the show on the road, preferably tonight at the hotel," I bluffed.

"For that I would be quite amenable," Dobbs said. "I shall be at the head of the line to exonerate myself."

But you know what? Darla said that Dobbs didn't come back to his panel from lunch. There was a note to us at the hotel desk saying that he'd been called home for a family emergency. Don't know if the cops had voiceprints in mind for us or anyone else, but the

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prospect thereof sure lit a fire under that boy. One thing's for sure, though. There were no more extorting phone calls made.

Darla and I were still puzzling out the Columbus mess and Dr. Edwin Dobbs the day before we were to fly on home.

The police had used a portable X-ray machine on Columbus's burial receptacle. There were bones in it and their configuration jibed with the records. Whosever bones they were. Nothing had been settled.

We were at an Irish pub across the street from the cathedral, unwinding after they'd wrapped up the last symposium biz. Darla had a salad and I'd scarfed down Irish sausage tapas and French fries like there was no tomorrow. We were holding hands in our booth and drinking dark Irish beer.

"Despite being in denial, Brick, I must accept your hypothesis that Ed Dobbs probably made the phone calls. The timing of his hasty departure is more than suspicious and he has the language skills."

"Money's thicker than water."

"What on earth does that mean, Mr. Cryptic?"

"Beats me, but Dobbs's book bombed. It stunk up the bookstore shelves and sold, like, twenty-five copies," I reminded her. "He had to resent this book contract of Bryce and Neil's, built on a foundation of guano. But those boys made Dobbs an offer he couldn't refuse. Do this small favor and make enough money to get out of the hole. Hell, Dobbs may even have approached them."

"Conjecture, Brick."

"We made Dobbs paranoid and paranoia don't lie. He restored my lack of faith in humanity."

"*Columbus: A Critical Study on His Origins, Path of Discovery, and Final Years* is the standard by which all Columbus books should be judged. Ed Dobbs should be rightfully proud of it."

"What's quality got to do with bookstore customers lining up at the cash register?"

"Brick," Darla said in all seriousness as she stroked my arm. "Not every writer is motivated by the urge to be a bestseller."

All I could do is shake my head at the naiveness of that remark. "Irregardless, the cops like Dobbs for the phone calls, but good luck with extradition. He must've thought I was a dunce. Lobbying me to dig into the situation—he thought I'd make a fiasco of the case."

Darla kissed my cheek. "As we speak, Ed Dobbs is regretting underestimating you. Whether he's guilty or innocent, by running away he's sent his academic career into shambles."

"Well?" I said.

"Well what?"

"You know what. Is it Chris in the box or isn't it? Was it ever him? Did Franco dump some bones in there to replace Chris's bones he gave to Mussolini?"

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"We raised some intriguing questions that will be explored. We're very excited about the possibilities."

"Between you, me, and the gatepost, this symposium is a boondoggling joyride."

"No, Brick, it is a scholarly venture."

I groaned. "Since Dobbs got me assigned to the case, I guess my honorarium's out the window, huh?"

"Not exactly. I've been waiting for the ideal moment to tell you. You're invited gratis again to our next symposium, should there be one."

"No cash money?"

"Sorry."

"Conspiracies give me a headache and we've got a barrel full of rotten apples here. I'm used to dealing with one sleazoid at a crack," I muttered. "Everybody's off scot-free. There is no justice."

"There, there," Darla said, holding my beer to my lips, as if calming a squalling kid. "I haven't told you this, Brick, but Mary Beth and I have recruited symposium members who are also outraged. We're drafting a letter to present to Neil and Bryce's publishers. With any luck, they will withdraw their contract and demand their advance back."

With any luck, I thought. Good luck with that.

We sat quietly, enjoying each other's company. Darla finally said, "I have two confessions to make."

"Give me the easiest one first. I'll let you know if I wanna hear the other."

"You were correct about 'synapse.' It has a verb form."

I fisted the air. "All right!"

"I had a close encounter with Riley Neil similar to Mary Beth's."

I should've known. The signs were there. He'd gone into El Rinconcillo hot to trot to rendezvous with her. "Where, when?"

"Brick, please keep your voice down. It was inappropriate touching. I put an end to it in a hurry. I slapped him."

"He groped you? Copped a feel?"

"If you choose to use that terminology."

I remade that fist and pounded it into a palm. "If I'd known, I'd've dismantled the bastard."

"That's why I didn't tell you. No harm was done."

Back at the hotel as we headed for our room, Riley Neil came crashing down the hall, backwards on his heels, backpedaling by us.

Mary Beth Lambuth was in hot pursuit, yelling, "You creep, I warned you what would happen if you tried that again!"

She landed a terrific left hook, flooring him. Darla clapped, starting a round of applause that lasted and lasted.

Like a referee, I stood over Neil, counting him out. There is *some* justice. ●

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Body Shop

by Terry Barbieri

Few women in the mystery field write from a male point of view, as Terry Barbieri does. Her P.I. Nick Gallagher is brilliantly realized in this story, despite the gender gap that exists between him and his creator. The author's work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her stories have appeared in many literary magazines. ¶

It's still dark outside when I shove the bag of ice against the driver's door and lay my fractured left arm on top of it. I don't dare stop at an emergency room here in San Antonio; I don't know how many more thugs Vance has out looking for me. I shift into reverse, peel out of the Stop-N-Go parking lot, and aim my pickup west towards the Rio Grande.

While early-morning commuters crowd the highway's inbound lanes, the outgoing lanes lie empty, except for a couple of eighteen-wheelers. I resist the urge to gun past them. The last thing I need right now is for a cop to pull me over.

As the sun rises in my rearview mirror, melting ice runs down the driver's door. Outside Uvalde, I pull up in front of a liquor store and cross the dusty yard to a gray trailer. An unshaven man answers the door.

"I know you don't open till noon . . ."

He squints into the morning sunlight. "You got cash?"

I pull a couple of twenties from my pocket.

He slides his feet into a pair of leather flip-flops and leads me to the store, where I purchase a bottle of Cuervo Gold. Carrying it outside, I sit down on a bench, grip the bottle between my knees, twist off the top with my one good hand, and take three long swigs. The fire in my throat momentarily blots out the pain in my arm.

I climb back into my truck and hit the open road. As the tequila seeps into my veins, the highway blurs to a gentle ribbon. I follow the dotted white line towards the Mexican border.

Close to noon, I cruise into Del Rio and park outside the emergency room. Inside, brown faces crowd the waiting room: the drawn faces of mothers cradling feverish infants; the jaundiced face of a doubled-over teen; the stone-cold face of a construction worker with a bloody towel wrapped around his hand. I print my name, Nick Gallagher, on the receptionist's clipboard. Then I roll

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up an ancient issue of *Life,* place it over one chair's steel arm, and rest my arm on it.

Leaning back, I close my eyes and see Jessica as I left her, wearing a Bourbon Street T-shirt with nothing underneath. She said she would give me twelve hours, but she had lied. She must have called her father as soon as I'd left, then e-mailed him the video capturing everything I'd done to her, or rather everything she'd done to me. Only it wouldn't appear that way. Why else would Vance have sent two heavyweight goons to my San Antonio apartment? I'm pretty sure I didn't kill them. In broad daylight, with two good arms at my disposal, I can shoot the cap off a Corona bottle at twenty yards. Shooting one-handed in the dark, while ducking the swing of a baseball bat, is a different story.

Vance and I grew up together, two white boys in one of San Antonio's oldest barrios. We learned Spanglish on the streets, ran with the same gang, and shared Marlboros, six-packs, and the occasional joint. Though we'd led vastly different lives since high school, Vance and his wife Lorraine had me over for dinner several times a year. I often wondered whether it bothered the staunchly Catholic Lorraine that Vance had made his small fortune producing black-market porn.

While Vance earned his living by wronging the rights of the underage girls he featured in his flicks, I became a private investigator and earned mine by righting the wrongs suffered by the wives of unfaithful husbands. Sometimes I thought about starting over in some seaside village, where fish fought over baited hooks and a man could make himself at home in a one-room hut, but I'd never made it past the Texas border.

Last Sunday, as Vance and I shared a pitcher of Scorpion's Tail at The Brewery, I noticed the gray strands which had begun to take over his full head of hair. Across a plate-size table, Vance told me, "I need your help."

"What's up?"

"Jessica's boss has been sexually harassing her."

The Scorpion's Tail had wielded a more powerful sting than I'd realized. I could have sworn Vance had used Jessica's name and the words *sexually harassed* in the same sentence. Jessica was a doughy girl with a pug nose and frizzy hair the color of swamp water. The Cro-Magnon ancestress of the girls Vance featured in his films. "What was that?"

"Jessica's boss at Surplex has been asking her for sexual favors in exchange for a promotion. I want you to get everything you can on the bastard."

"No problem." I'd played this gig before, taking a job as a maintenance man to gain access to storage closets and between-floor crawl spaces. When I wasn't installing phone jacks or unclogging toilets, I'd drill holes in walls and shoot footage through them. "I'd

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like to speak to Jessica. Where does she work?"

"Surplex's home office in Houston. She's in Human Resources."

"Does she know I'm coming?"

"She asked for you. She says you're the best."

I left San Antonio at eight the following morning and pulled up in front of Surplex shortly before noon, its tower of tinted glass reflecting Houston's skyline. Inside, a tropical atrium flourished beneath soaring skylights. An iguana turned a beady eye as I walked past him towards the elevator.

Stepping out on the seventh floor, I approached a young blonde seated behind a semicircular desk. Her sleeveless dress showed off the tastiest stack I'd seen this side of a Big Boy breakfast platter. Her face looked vaguely familiar.

"Is Jessica Sancetti here?"

She stared at me for a moment before answering. "She's at lunch. Can I help you?"

"I'm here to apply for a job."

She handed me an application. After I'd completed it, she looked it over. "We don't have any openings right now, but I'll keep this on file."

"Thanks."

I had nearly reached the elevator when she called me back. "Mr. Gallagher, I bought an entertainment center last Saturday. I didn't realize, until they delivered it, that it has to be assembled. Do you think you could put it together for me? I'd pay you."

"When?"

"Tonight?" She printed her name and address on a Post-it and held it out, nails glistening red as a freshly cut watermelon.

I took the Post-it and read her name. *Sara Anderson.* "I'll be there."

I expected Sara to live in a two-story apartment building surrounded by acres of asphalt. Instead I found myself pulling into the underground garage of a skyrise overlooking Buffalo Bayou. Murky as a day-old cup of coffee in which the milk has gone bad, Buffalo Bayou winds through the heart of Houston. I rode the elevator to the twelfth floor and knocked on her door.

Sara ushered me into a living area larger than the wood-frame house I'd grown up in. A tiled island separated the kitchen from the living area, where a slab of glass balanced atop four concrete balls served as a coffee table. A painting of an all-black jazz band hung over the fireplace. Two ceramic masks, rhinestones swirling around the eyes, hung beside it.

Sara led me to a box leaning against one wall, industrial staples gleaming from an open flap. One of the staples drew blood as I reached in and pulled out a thirty-page instruction booklet. I lifted the sealed end of the box and pieces of wood and bags of screws

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slid onto the floor.

"Have you eaten?"

"No." Was that an invitation?

As I got to work, the smell of garlic bread reminded me of the meals I'd eaten at Vance's home. Lorraine put garlic in everything except her cheesecake.

The clouds had turned purple, giving the sky a bruised look, when Sara called me to the table. Two leafy green salads, topped with tomatoes and pine nuts, and two plates of tortellini dusted with parmesan lured me to sit down. Sara held up a bottle of Pinot Grigio. "If I serve this with dinner, is that thing going to morph into a computer desk?"

I looked over my shoulder at the half-finished entertainment center. "Let's drink it and find out."

Ten minutes into our meal, Sara asked how long I'd been out of work.

I tried to remember what I'd written on my application. "Two months."

"You're not really a maintenance man, are you, Nick?"

The wine in my mouth turned to vinegar. "Why would you say that?"

"Jessica told me. I wouldn't have brought it up, but I need help."

"You're being harassed, too?"

"I wish it were that simple. Several years ago I was in a car accident that left my face badly deformed. The nurses told me I was lucky to be alive, but I didn't feel lucky. A week after I got out of the hospital, a child in a grocery store took one look at me and burst into tears. I quit college. I figured no one would ever hire me, just like no man would ever again ask me out."

As Sara spoke, I studied her face but detected no scars, other than a faint track left by a couple of stitches between her nose and her upper lip.

"A friend of a friend told me about this agency that will send you to a private hospital and spa they call the Body Shop. They do plastic surgery, cosmetic dentistry, body sculpting, anything you want. Then you work it off afterwards, the way indentured servants used to work off their passage."

I recalled an older client of mine who'd traveled to Guadalajara for a face-lift and tummy tuck. A plastic surgeon there catered to Americans who couldn't afford cosmetic surgery back home.

Sara continued, "They're the ones who got me my job. Last week they ordered me to start gathering information for them about Surplex: its bank routing and account numbers, the names of its creditors . . ."

"Identity theft."

"I don't want to do it, but I don't know how to get out of it. Someone told me that one girl who threatened to report what was going

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on was found dead afterwards in a house fire."

I topped off Sara's wineglass and mine. "Let me think about it."

I was still thinking two hours later when I tightened the last screw on the entertainment center. Sara had already changed into a pair of paisley print pajamas and was curled up on the couch watching Letterman.

"Finished." I tossed the screwdriver into my toolbox.

Sara rose and wrote me a check. "How about a nightcap?"

"Sure." I took a seat on the couch, while she poured brandy into two snifters. She handed me one, then sat down beside me. The brandy went down smooth as a freshly iced skating rink. "Remy Martin?"

Sara smiled. "I like a man who knows his brandy."

"What else do you like?"

She drew circles on my shoulder with the tip of her index finger. "Lots of things."

I gestured towards the entertainment center. "I'm good with my hands."

"With your tools, too, I bet."

I took another swallow of brandy and followed her to the bedroom.

Close to midnight, Sara climbed out of bed, pulled on a Bourbon Street T-shirt, and crossed the room to her armoire. By the muted light of a bedside lamp she had draped with a burgundy scarf, I watched her stand on tiptoe, reach up towards a piece of equipment, and press a button. I expected the blues, filtering through the speakers, to go off, but the saxophone continued its throaty lament. Turning away from the armoire, Sara lit a cigarette. Smoke curled out of her mouth as she looked out at the night sky.

A few minutes later, she stubbed out the cigarette and turned to me. "You still don't recognize me, do you?"

Had we met before? Over a drunken weekend in a drunken town? I shook my head.

"I'm Jessica."

Vance's Jessica?

"The new and improved Jessica, as my father sees it. He was always embarrassed by the way I looked. He never said so, but I knew. When I finished college he sent me to a makeover specialist. He said a front-office appearance would help me land the right job. I kept telling him I wanted to start my own business, that I didn't want to work for someone else, but he wouldn't listen."

I sat up, my back supported by the wrought-iron headboard, and studied her face. Her eyes and mouth could be Jessica's, but I would never have recognized them beneath the silken blond hair, punctuated by a now-perfect nose. The doughy cheeks and the second chin were gone, replaced by clearly defined cheekbones and a

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tapered neck.

"So there was no Body Shop? No agency turning girls into indentured servants?"

"There was a body shop, all right, a spa in the middle of the Arizona desert with plastic surgeons on staff. You could say I'm indentured to my father."

"Why didn't you tell me you were Jessica?"

"All through high school, I had this wild crush on you. If you'd known I was Vance Sancetti's daughter, you'd never have slept with me. I remember, once there was this father-daughter dance at my school. Dad was in Mexico on business and Mom said I should ask you to escort me. You said you had a prior commitment, but I knew the real reason you wouldn't go was that I wasn't pretty enough. It's funny how differently you acted when you saw me at Surplex."

What had I done? Vance had hired me to protect his daughter from the big bad corporate wolf. Instead I'd huffed and I'd puffed and I'd . . .

"What about this supervisor who's been harassing you?"

"An innocent flirtation. I was hoping that if I told my dad I was being mistreated at Surplex, he'd loan me the money I need to start my own business. I want to open an ice-cream parlor in the French Quarter. *La Dolce Vita.* I'll serve parfaits layered with syrups made from Kahlua, amaretto, and peach schnapps. But Dad says he's already invested enough in me, that the time has come for me to pay him back."

"Pay him back?" Surely Vance would never feature his own daughter in one of his films.

Jessica sat on the edge of the bed and dug her heels into the carpet. "There's this man, Enrique, who lives in Monterrey. His father is a close friend of my dad's. They import olive oil into Mexico and Enrique wants to expand into the states. I went out with him a few times, as a favor to my dad. Now he wants to marry me. I don't believe he's in love with me, but marrying an American citizen would make it a lot easier for him to live and do business in the U.S."

"Your father wouldn't ask you to marry a man you don't love."

"Enrique's father helped my dad get his films distributed in Mexico. Enrique's hinted to my dad that if I don't marry him, he'll report his use of underage, undocumented girls. Dad told me I have a month to accept Enrique's proposal or he'll cut off my allowance."

"Allowance?"

"How else could I afford this place?" She rose and studied herself in the mirror. "Do you know, not a single boy ever asked me out in high school. Now men won't leave me alone. All you guys care about is how a woman looks."

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"We're victims of our testosterone."

"No, Nick, *we're* victims of your testosterone." She turned to face me. "I need your help."

The urgency in her voice made me uneasy. I fished beneath the sheets for my jockey shorts. "What kind of help?"

"I need you to get some basic information about my father's company: bank account numbers, tax ID, the names and addresses of his creditors. Then I can apply for a loan under his business name and use the money to open my ice-cream parlor."

"Jessica, I can't betray your father."

"You already have. There's a camcorder on top of the armoire. It recorded our little scene here and uploaded it to my server. You have twelve hours to decide whether you're going to help me. If you decide not to, I'll forward the video to my dad."

"Let me think about it." If Vance saw that scene, he might feature me in his first snuff film. I retrieved my jeans and shirt from the floor. "I'll call you in the morning; we'll work something out."

If I were smart, I would have taken my time leaving, kissed her goodbye, given her some sign that I cared. Instead I dressed and left so quickly, Jessica must have realized by the time I reached the elevator that I wouldn't be calling her.

I sped back to my motel, threw my clothes into my bag, tucked my forty-five into my boot, and hit the road.

An hour west of Houston, the floodlit shopping centers thinned out and disappeared. On either side of the interstate, ranchland melted into the blackened horizon. Not a single light shone in a single farmhouse window.

Shortly after four, I pulled into San Antonio's downtown maze of one-way streets. The city's familiar smell greeted me as I parked outside my second-floor office. San Antonio smelled like the homes of my boyhood friends, the morning after their grandmothers had made tamales. Steamed cornhusks. Charred chili peppers. Lard.

I unlocked the street door and hurried up the termite-riddled stairs to my office. By the light of the bail-bond sign outside my window, I dumped the contents of my desk and my clients' files into cardboard boxes, emptied my safe, and carted everything down to my truck.

It was still dark when I pulled up in front of my apartment. Insects swarmed the outside lamps with all the enthusiasm of college students swarming a keg of beer.

I let myself in without turning on the lights and was halfway across the room before I smelled his aftershave. I turned towards the hulking silhouette of a man and ducked as he raised a baseball bat and swung it at my head. My hair rose as the bat passed over it. The intruder spun full circle and struck my left arm with a loud crack.

As I yanked my pistol from my boot, a second man lunged out of the shadows. My left arm refused to bend at the elbow. My right

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hand alone clutched my forty-five, my wrist taking the full force of the recoil as I fired the entire round. Bullets traced molten streaks through the air.

I shoved the gun into my pocket and, supporting my left arm with my right, stumbled down the stairs, climbed into my pickup, and tore out of the parking lot.

"Nick Gallagher." An aide takes me down the hall for X-rays, then leads me to an examining room. The blue paper lining the examining table crackles as I sit down. Several minutes later, a nurse appears with a cup of water and an even smaller cup containing a single white pill. "We'll give the Demerol a few minutes to take effect. Then the doctor will give you a local and set your arm."

I wash down the pill. As the pain in my arm recedes, I drowsily recall drinking iced tea in my sister Paula's kitchen. Outside the window, two of my nephews picked up sticks and started beating the shirts on the clothesline.

Paula frowned. "Boys are worse than girls, but I'd take a bad boy over a bad girl any day."

"Why's that?"

"A boy will be bad right in front of you: kicking his brother, hanging from the ceiling fan, tossing your cell phone in the toilet to see if it will float. But bad girls are devious. Sneaky. They do things when you aren't looking and they cover their tracks. There's this girl down the street I won't even let in the house anymore."

"Is her name Jessica?" I mumble as the nurse and the doctor file into the room.

The doctor studies my X-rays, then examines my arm. "How'd you break it?"

"I tripped over a Tonka truck someone left on the stairs."

"Anything else hurt?"

"No."

The clear fluid the doctor injects into the crook of my elbow burns a path through my veins before my arm goes numb.

An hour later, I leave the emergency room wearing a fresh cast. Ignoring the doctor's instructions not to drive for four hours, I climb into my car and head south to the International Bridge.

As soon as I've crossed the Rio Grande, I buy a map and mark the best route to Guadalajara. Once I get there, I'll have a barber cut my hair short and tint it a salt-and-pepper gray. Then I'll find one of those plastic surgeons who caters to Americans and check into his clinic, or body shop, as Jessica would call it. I'll order wider eyes, a cleft chin, a Roman nose.

Afterwards, recuperating in some hidden courtyard, I'll have plenty of time to come up with a new name, a new birthday, a new life. The Outer Banks. Key West. Baja.

After all, I have nothing left to lose. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THERE'S A GIRL FOR ME

by Tom Tetzlaff

I saw her stroll from the ladies' underwear store, and I said to myself, now there's a girl for me.

Tall, lanky-thin, hair black and shiny like a mink coat. The flip of her curls bounced off her shoulders; the shopping bags swung in cadence with her certain stride.

She is coming my way. I know I shouldn't stare, but I can't help it—that's who I am.

I'll call her Barbara. I like to name the women I watch after old girlfriends. She reminds me of Barbara.

She wasn't my first love, but I loved her deep and true.

It was in college—wild days of Jim Beam, sloe gin, hot jazz, and easy virtue. I was a straggler. I actually studied my freshman year—a country bumpkin trying for the American Dream.

My new Barbara stops where I am seated and looks right at me. There is no recognition of shame in her large brown eyes.

She speaks: "Excuse me—is this seat taken?"

I can't respond. I am frozen and mute. I can only blink "no". She drops her Macy's and Victoria's Secret bags next to me, pirouettes, and plops down with a big sigh.

I wonder if I can look in her bag without her noticing, but I am afraid to look. Is she staring at me, at my deformity? This is a brave girl to sit by a bizarre stranger in a deserted mall.

Barbara was brave, too. Or at least I thought so then. She had a red Ford convertible and drove like an enchanted witch, hair flopping like a horse's tail, big brown eyes wide with excited fear, her lips red, hair wind-stuck to her teeth as she concentrated on the curves in the road ahead.

She taught me a lot: how to drive, how to drink whiskey, and how to suck pot deep into my soul. How to lose yourself in

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another's pleasure.

My new Barbara is talking to me, so I listen. I struggle and must appear interested. But I never know if I am doing it right.

Oh God, she's asking me about what she bought. She shows me the lace nightie. Yes, yes, I think it is very nice, but I don't think Victoria should be selling her secrets in public. I say this, but she doesn't hear me. I am mute.

It doesn't seem to bother her. She puts the garment away and tells me about her boyfriend. He has a sissy name like Robert, or Ronald, or Thomas. I just know that no one used their given names in my neighborhood. He would be Bob, or Ron, or Tom, a real man's name.

She says he doesn't want kids. She thinks he will change. What do I think? She says he wants to leave her. Do I think he will stay if she wears these?

How can I answer that? How can anyone know what is in the future? Just look at me.

Barbara didn't want our child. I was from family, and it was good. But she had wounds I could not see, wounds that smoldered in her womb and could not heal.

In her mind, my baby was still her uncle's child.

She smoked more, drank more, and drove off a cliff one dark and rainy night. The police tried to blame it on me. It wasn't my fault. Really it wasn't.

I want to tell my new Barbara that life is danger, that life is joy and no one knows what is around that wet and slippery curve ahead.

But I am mute.

I try hard to talk and a single grunt escapes from deep in my throat, my first sound in months. Elated, I want to tell her more, but a young man with too-pale skin, red and blotchy with excitement, comes to her side and tells her what he bought. He uses big sweeping gestures and singsong words. She tries to kiss him but he turns a beef-patty cheek to her.

I want to tell her that he is as shallow as a river skiff, but I am mute.

I hear them coming to get me, to take me away in my prison chair.

"Grandpa, are you okay? Who's your new friend?" Janny turns to talk to my new Barbara. "I hope he didn't scare you. He drools, and his eyes water like that since his stroke."

My new Barbara looks at me and smiles. She says that I was great company and that we had a nice chat.

They move behind to push my wheelchair away. My new Barbara leans over and kisses me on my salty cheek. I blink a fond goodbye, but she does not know.

She turns and strides away swinging her Macy's bag. Robert or Ronald or Thomas quicksteps after her. And as they turn my chair I see she has left her secret bag next to me. Yes, you are my type, I want to yell. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

The Last Calabresi

by Jean Femling

"Hey, you can see the Calabresi place from up here," Jake said. Lulled by the rhythmic groan of the wipers, I sat up as Jake wheeled his big red pickup truck onto a deserted road. We splashed ahead between ranks of dormant grapevines marching away like blackened tau crosses over the brilliant green slopes.

He braked at the top of the hill. The rain had thinned to a light drizzle, and I stared.

The Calabresi mansion sat on a knoll about a mile away, a semi-fortress of dark stone against heavily wooded hills. Above it, masses of blue-black cloud bellied up the sky. Leftward, toward the coast, a rim of light edged the distant mountain ridge. A sudden bolt of sunlight slanted below the cloud cover, struck the Calabresi house, and blazed out from the center of the upper floor like a great beacon. Then it was gone.

"Wow." I sat blinking, blinded by the dazzle. "What was that?"

"Reflection off Noni's sunroom," Jake said. "Old Tomase built it for his wife when he enlarged the house."

"Maybe it's an omen."

"I thought we'd agreed not to mention any of that up here. Right, Cassandra?" That's me, Cass for short. Cassandra was the Greek

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seer nobody ever believed. And "that" was the Calabresi Curse.

"Obviously," I said. I hadn't traveled six hundred miles today to offend our hosts. We were up here in California's wine country to celebrate the fortieth birthday of Jake's old buddy Evan Calabresi and ignore the Calabresi Curse, which Evan had told Jake about years ago. Evan's father and his grandfather had both died violently in their forties due to some mysterious condition the doctors had never been able to diagnose. The Evan I'd met was perfectly healthy, but Jake was convinced that even though Evan had never mentioned the subject since, he expected to die the same way.

Author of three mystery novels —*Backyard*, *Hush Money*, and *Getting Mine*—Californian Jean Femling is also a talented short story writer who last appeared in *EQMM* in December 2002. She joins us here with a country-house whodunit whose suspects are part of a house party shut in by a flood.

"I can't believe a guy as sharp as Evan would pay attention to something like that."

"What matters is, he does," Jake said.

Jake headed downgrade. The daylight had died, night closed down, and as if on signal another curtain of rain descended and Jake turned on the headlights. "Maybe we'll have separate rooms," I said.

"I doubt it. Evan knows we're living together." Jake reached over and squeezed my knee. We'd finally decided we wanted to get married and start a family—"Our own tribe," as Jake said. Pretty foolhardy, given the messes our parents had made of their lives. So we were keeping totally quiet about it, giving ourselves six months beforehand to see how we handled our differences.

We headed downhill and the road disappeared at the bottom into a boiling chocolate-brown torrent carrying along snags and whole branches. Jake hesitated an instant and then stepped on the gas. I clamped my mouth shut to hold in my scream: It was too late to stop. We hit the water with a splash and the front wheels sent up a wave on both sides.

It's only hub-deep, I thought, only about ten feet across, but we were still going downhill with the water rising. Jake steered rightward against the current, the water rumbled and gurgled underfoot. Then the motor coughed, and coughed again—we were stalling.

Jake had the gas pedal all the way down as the truck slowed, but the rear wheels were losing traction and then the rear end began to float free, swinging sideways with the current. The front wheels spun and almost grabbed and spun again as the road leveled; the grade was rising and they caught. The rear end settled and we pulled ahead, out of the water. Jake locked onto the wheel and accelerated.

My heart was pounding so hard I couldn't breathe, and an

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artery in Jake's neck throbbed. We went ahead at half speed, bent forward, focused on the road. Images filled my brain of us yanked sideways, the truck rolling over and being swept away.

"All right," he said. "No more omens, okay?"

The road ended at a wide gravel turnaround in front of the Calabresi house. The balcony of Noni's sunroom formed an overhang above the double doors and partly sheltered a broad half-circle stone terrace. As we pulled up, Evan came out carrying a poncho and a black umbrella. I opened the truck door and stepped down into an icy ankle-high stream.

"Jake! Stay in there." Evan met me with a quick, fierce one-armed hug and a cheek kiss. Same piercing stare; same wiry, dark good looks; same impact. "Cassie! You look wonderful." Lean as a greyhound—through his raincoat I felt ribs, and the ropes of muscle along his back. If it weren't for Jake, I could've been seriously attracted to Evan Calabresi.

He handed me the umbrella. "Go on inside. We've got to do some more sandbagging."

I squelched across the terrace and into a broad entrance hall with a threadbare Persian carpet covered with several mud rugs. A hall tree hung with raincoats dripped into a nest of towels. Behind the left-hand door a mixer went in short bursts and a woman called out, "Just a minute—be right there."

Through the door on my right lay a smallish sitting room, and farther along, a wide staircase slanting up sideways. The double doors straight ahead opened on a dining room with the table already set, dimly lit by a massive chandelier.

The kitchen door popped open and a pretty Latina about my age burst out swathed in a bunchy chef's apron, her single thick braid coiled high and held with a big red clip, and her hand outstretched. "Hi! I'm Evan's sort-of girlfriend, Sochi Alarcon; I'm in here doing his birthday cake. Not that he'll eat any of it."

"Cass, Cassandra Bailey. Sochi?"

"Short for Xochitl, from my daddy's activist days. I was his little Aztlan princess." A strand of blond threaded through the black braid. "Sochi's hot," Jake had said, and she was—high-cheekboned, vivid, sexy, strong. I can hold my own in a crowd, but Sochi's the one everybody would see first.

She reached into the closet for a pair of gray slipper socks. "Come and put these on while we dry your shoes."

The big kitchen took up the end of the house, its restaurant-sized range dominated by a slender brown man in an orange shirt and a white baker's pillbox: Wilson Tang, the Filipino cook. "Call him Tang. Everybody does," Sochi said. Tang looked maybe fifty, but was over seventy and had been with the family since Evan was born.

He squeezed my hand gently. "I am responsible for the conducting of the entire household. If you are in need of anything at all,

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you must contact me at once."

The kitchen smelled wonderful. Wild mushrooms he'd gathered himself, Tang said, and Petaluma ducks he'd killed and dressed.

This was clearly Tang's lair. In the back corner a roll-top desk overflowed with bills, catalogs, and sporting papers, a television tuned to basketball and a radio droning weather and traffic conditions.

Sochi asked about our trip up, and I told her about the drowned road. She was worried about getting back to town tomorrow to start the inventory at her business, which specialized in mineral and crystal specimens and carvings.

I heard Evan and Jake pass by in the hall, talking and laughing.

"Maybe he'll sleep tonight." Tang nodded toward the ceiling. "All night long I hear him up there, *bum—bum—bum,* running on his machine."

Sochi volunteered to show me our room, stopping by the hall closet on our way. "I hope they still keep the heaters in here. I haven't been up here for two months." Uh-oh. She dug out two space heaters and handed me one. "This place is impossible to heat."

"Who all are you expecting?" I asked as we started up the broad staircase.

She looked surprised. "Just us." Evan's mother, long remarried and living in Virginia, was cruising in the South Pacific. "Oh. Uncle Farley. He's down in the library watching TV. No way would he pass up the chance for a good meal."

"I didn't know Evan had an uncle. Is he well?"

Sochi nodded; she seemed to understand exactly what I was asking. "Oh, quite."

I seized the opportunity. "I never did hear exactly how Evan's father died. Or his grandfather, either." The staircase ended in the center of the upstairs hall, with a railing all around the opening; an odd arrangement. Music from two acoustic guitars came from the room at the end, above the kitchen, and Jake started singing. *"In the shuffling madness . . . locomotive breath . . ."*

Sochi lowered her voice. "Evan's father killed himself," she said. "My own father was vineyard manager here then. I used to love it up here. I was nine when Tom Calabresi walked up into the woods and blew out his brains.

"Not even a note. Horrible for the family. Forty-three years old. He'd been having *headaches."* She scowled. Did she not believe it? "Of course he'd watched his own father, Tomase, go crazy. Turned violent, had to be tied down in his bed." Sochi nodded toward the far end of the hall. "In a coma the last six months. He was forty-seven."

"And they never found any cause?"

"You just know they tried everything. Clinics, experimental programs—now they're talking stem cells. Evan's been under the microscope his whole life, and he's let himself be taken over by the dark side. Fatalistic; wicked. Helping it happen. So the less said

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about it, the better. Okay?" I could see that she really did love him, and she was totally frustrated.

Our room was at center back, opposite the stairwell. Sochi opened the door and a wall of cold, dank air flowed out. The room was mega-country, all maple and rag rugs. And—ugh!—twin beds with white chenille spreads, like a '40s movie. I knew the sheets would be clammy.

"I'd start the heaters going now," Sochi said. "You'll have to share the bathroom." She opened the bathroom door and set her heater down. "I'm on the other side."

I started the other heater in the center of the room. As she left Sochi pointed out Farley's door opposite, next to the glassed-in sunroom, and dropped her voice. "They say old Tomase never believed Farley was really his son. Anyway, Farley's over sixty now and still charging, sharp tongue, big gut, and all."

Sochi yipped as a smiling head appeared in the stairwell, the dark V of hair close-clipped, with a little Machiavelli goatee to match. "Well, hidy. And here you have me in the flesh! I wondered where you'd got to, Sochi." Tweeded and groomed to a razor's edge, Uncle Farley carried his years of good living quite well. Portly, that's the word.

Sochi introduced us and Farley said, "Come on, Miss Sharp-Eyes," with a knowing smile. "I need you to look at something for me." Farley led the way through the glass-walled sunroom, dark now, and onto the balcony above the front entrance. The balcony was roofed, and the rain was slanting away.

"I'm worried about Noni's Parcel," Farley said. One of the fields was being undermined by the rising creek, and Farley went into a rant about ignorant county officials and the stupid and corrupt Corps of Engineers. "Sochi, look down toward the creek. Can you see anything like the shine of water?" He bent over the thigh-high iron railing, shading his eyes.

Obliging, Sochi leaned out. "Nope." Nothing was visible but a steady curtain of rain against black. "Ask me again later, when the lanterns are turned off."

Only when Farley discovered that the road in was submerged did he turn to me. "I was afraid of that," he said. "Now I'm going to be stuck here overnight."

When I finished unpacking I knocked on Evan's door. Downstairs Sochi and Tang were discussing serving dishes and when to start the rice.

"Step into my playpen," said Evan. The long room was jammed with a pool table, king-sized waterbed, giant television, several drums, his computer corner, and a grove of fierce-looking chromed workout machines. I felt as if I'd lost my hearing, and realized that the room was thickly carpeted and the walls hung with heavy draperies.

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Evan handed me a bongo. "Make yourself useful."

When Tang buzzed Evan for dinner I went downstairs first, aware that I should've volunteered to help.

"No food till everybody is sitting down!" Tang stood in the dining room with a majestic scowl and his arms folded. "Right now! It's ready."

Evan and Jake came along the upstairs hall talking and laughing. Sochi took off her apron, revealing a dark green knit dress patterned with roses. With a big smile she arranged herself in the dining-room doorway, leaning against the doorframe with one arm up, her knee cocked, and the other arm cupped around the distinct bulge of her belly. What? Sochi was pregnant? Impossible. Yes: true.

Jake stopped at the bottom of the stairs, dazzled. "Sochi, baby! Hey there—looks like you've got something in the oven." He rushed across to give her a brotherly hug.

Evan froze on the bottom stair. "What have you done!" he shouted. His look of horror turned the room to ice. Tang stood in the doorway, expressionless. Nobody spoke.

Sochi straightened up. "Don't worry. This is nobody's concern but mine."

"How could you do this?" Evan stood rigid. "You promised—" He and Sochi were nose-to-nose in a quietly furious argument, all hisses and snarls.

Jake murmured in my ear, "So what is he? Just the sperm donor?"

"Come to dinner now." Tang clapped once. "The ducks will be ruined! They dry out! You can talk at the table."

Tang directed us to our places, and the ritual took over. Waiting to be seated, I noticed odd little crackling sounds in the big chandelier close overhead. The crystals were veiled in dust and cobwebs starred with tiny clots of shrouded insects. A few surviving spiders ran frantically through the maze until they frizzled in the heat.

Evan sat at the head of the table with Sochi and me on either side, Jake beside me, and Farley opposite him. Sochi appeared calm and inward-looking, radiating content. No need to envy her: My turn would come. What a way to tell Evan, though. Why? Because she'd been afraid of his reaction? "You promised!" Evan had said.

Tang served everybody from a rolling cart, starting with Sochi. The duck was truly wonderful, though I caught myself shielding my plate from possible fried spiders. Jake asked Farley about the effect of this rain on the vines, and he launched into a lecture.

"Larousse lists fourteen steps in the making of wine." We were up to "noble rot" when Jake interrupted, raising his glass. "This is certainly wonderful." He turned to Evan. "Home-grown?"

"The Calabresi label is defunct," Farley said. "The wonderful grapes are now simply raw material for other vintners. Time to replant Noni's Parcel with Cabernet Sauvignon grapes." Clearly, Farley lusted to get back into wine-making and be a player again.

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A gust of rain splattered the windows beyond the heavy draperies. "It's beginning to break up," Evan said to me. "Should be an excellent snow pack in the hills. Ever done any cross-country skiing?"

We were discussing his favorite trails when Evan went blank. Literally: silent and unseeing—I thought he was about to topple over, and put out my hand. He blinked, looked vague, and gave me a questioning look.

"It's okay," I said, and saw that he knew I'd keep his secret. My heart sank, and kept on descending. Evan's little episode looked like an epileptic seizure, a petit mal: I had a cousin who was epileptic, we'd all been prepared to react as needed. Did Jake know? Had Evan told him?

Epilepsy is usually manageable, and I could've been entirely wrong. Still I felt a sense of dread—that the curse was starting. "Let's don't feed this thing," Sochi had said. Because it was nothing, nothing unless you believed in it, and then it was everything.

The rumble of a deep-throated engine came from beyond the front door. The others heard it, too; we were all watching when the door crashed open. A sixtyish woman burst in, blond and decisive in a shiny black cape, calling, "Tang? Evan? Quickly, I need you!"

"My God, it's your mother," Sochi said. Tang groaned out loud.

Evan's mother, Leonor, waved to someone outside and swept in with a voluminous hug for Evan, cheek-kisses for Farley and Sochi, and nods to us. "I got a ride up with Leo Bonaducci in his Hum Two, the maddest luck." A Martha Stewart-type in black turtleneck and sweatpants, just blown in from the South Pacific, Roger somebody sent his plane for her, wasn't that sweet?

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming when we talked Thursday?" Evan demanded.

Leonor's look would have pierced an armadillo, but her smile never faltered. "Because you might've tried to talk me out of it, love."

In a trice the men hustled her three bags inside and she displaced Jake and me, moving us down one so she could sit next to Evan, all the while filling us in on her life. In the highlands of New Guinea four days ago watching the headhunters dance, she'd brought Evan one of their drums.

Tang, sullen, arrived with a heated plate for Leonor. "You didn't have to do that," she cooed. "You know I'll eat anything." She took in the grimy chandelier. "Your cleaning crew is cheating you, Evan. We need to have a talk. This place is an absolute slum! It ought to be gutted from the walls out."

I kept waiting for someone to tell Leonor about Sochi's condition. How would she receive the little intruder? She had two daughters by her developer husband, both safely married, and a baby grandson. Not till Tang had gone round with seconds and Farley's plate was cleaned did he sit back and turn to Leonor. "You should know that tonight we're having a double celebration. We've

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just learned that our Sochi is pregnant."

Leonor smiled back, waiting for him to go on: Clearly she thought he was joking.

"By all appearances, it's true," he said. "Ask her."

Leonor looked at Sochi. "This is amazing." She half-rose in her seat, staring at Sochi's belly, and Sochi, smiling, pushed back her chair to show Leonor.

"How terribly exciting. When are you due?"

"The doctor figures the third week in April." Sochi gave Evan a quick look. We were now in the first week in February.

The two women dropped into the duet: Who's your Ob-Gyn, which hospital, ultrasound, boy or girl? Sochi said she wanted to be surprised. Leonor recommended someone brilliant she knew at Stanford Medical. She never once looked at Evan, and projected warmth without revealing either approval or the opposite. But I felt in my bones that Leonor was shocked and furious, and that she too believed in the Calabresi curse.

After dinner Jake hung back to talk to me. "Can you believe Sochi?"

"So maybe it was an accident."

"You think Sochi ever allows accidents in her life?" Jake said.

"Anyway, it's a done deal. Everybody's just going to have to adapt."

"I don't think so," Jake said.

Sochi and Farley settled in to watch a hockey match, and Leonor sent Tang running to fetch lamps, bedding, and whatnot to make up the master suite at the far end of the upstairs floor. Evan and Jake were doing battle on the pool table, dealing with disaster in typical masculine fashion, by ignoring it. All the vital confrontations would take place later, behind closed doors. I watched a little hockey and the news, and went upstairs to bed.

When I opened our bedroom door I smelled something scorching. What? The space heater sat out of sight beyond the far bed, glowing red and not quite touching the white chenille bedspread, which was charred and beginning to smoke. I yanked out the cord and kicked the heater away into the middle of the floor.

Impossible. I was positive I hadn't left the heater anywhere near the bed, and Jake wouldn't have moved it. But then how—? I pulled the spread off the bed and ran water on the burned spot. The blanket underneath was hot to the touch, and browning, and I spread a wet towel over it to cool it. And then I noticed that the bathroom heater was gone.

Music, Miles Davis, came from Evan's room. Let them be: Deal with this tomorrow. I read till my eyes fell shut.

But I slept badly, vaguely aware of the wind buffeting the house and wailing in the eaves like a lost soul, and came full awake at the sound of somebody fumbling at the bedroom door. Incoherent muttering; Jake, and stupid drunk. I could smell him.

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"Oh God," he whined, "that Sochi is such a bitch. You have no idea. I am seriously ripped. I mean majorly."

"Shh. You don't have to wake up the world."

"As if. Oh God. You're not going to believe it. Oh, am I going to regret this tomorrow." Feeling for the bed in the dark, he missed and went down on one knee. "A real bitch! Aagh—"

"Go and throw up," I said.

"What?"

"Put your finger down your throat. Get rid of some of it or you'll have a terrible hangover."

"Good idea." He stumbled into the bathroom and I covered my head with my pillow to drown out his retching. Now I'd be awake for hours. Some vacation.

I was wrong. The next time consciousness found me it was starting to get light, and the wind was down. Then I heard it again, the sound that had waked me. A single sound, repeated at regular intervals like some lonely bird crying. Or a demented human.

I got up and went to the door. Yes: someone wailing, a man, his voice getting ragged now with the repetition, broken by coughing.

"Wake up, Jake." I shook his shoulder and pulled his covers back. "Something's wrong." I dragged on my robe. "I'm going to go see. Get up now! I need you."

Gray light flooded the hall from the sunroom opposite. Farley, executive-looking in a monogrammed brown robe, was starting down the stairs. "It's Tang," he said.

A blast of cold air swept up the staircase: The double front doors stood wide open. Tang's ragged wails came at longer intervals now. Jake, behind me, called, "Wait up!" and the outdoor cold burst over me.

Sochi's body lay sprawled on the rain-drenched paving stones with one arm flung out, the flowers in her sodden dress darkly brilliant, the thick two-toned braid had fallen free. Raindrops beaded crystal on her skin. I couldn't believe it, her face was so pale and smooth, drained of color, and I went close and touched her hand and her bare arm. It gave a little but it was cold, cold as the stone. Jake pulled me away.

"Oh, dear God, what has she done now?" Leonor said from the door. "This is terrible."

Farley, muttering, hugged himself tight. "A terrible accident."

"There was no need for this," Leonor said.

Afterwards I remembered everybody crying. Jake and I hung on to each other, rocking. It was drizzling again, and we moved back under the overhang.

"She didn't do it," Tang said, his voice raspy. "She wouldn't do it on purpose."

"Evan," Leonor said. "Someone's got to tell him. Jake, you go.

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And be gentle."

"She must've been leaning out in the dark to look, and lost her balance," Farley said. "I asked her last evening if she could see flooding on Noni's Parcel."

"Slippery with the wet, maybe?" Leonor said.

Evan ran out barefoot in his pajamas and knelt beside Sochi. He tried to pick her up and they made him stop, they were actually wrestling with him, and it was all beyond awful. Leonor brought a coat for Evan, and Tang covered Sochi's body with a yellow tarp. Jake and I, sharing the same idea, edged away, out of the ring of grief and fury. We were strangers, we didn't belong here.

We left Farley and Leonor discussing calling the sheriff, if the phone was working—cell phones didn't work up here. Not just Sochi was dead, I realized. The baby, too.

Shut in our room, our little sanctuary, we whispered together, trying to absorb what had happened. "It's only a fifteen- or twenty-foot drop," I said. "Not enough to kill you, normally. Sochi would know that." Suddenly the burned bedspread seemed ominous. "Did you by any chance move the heater close to the bed?" I asked Jake.

"Of course not." He scowled. "That would really be dangerous." Obviously he thought I'd been careless. I was too numb to argue.

The only other people who'd been up here last night were Tang and Leonor: Farley was watching TV with Sochi.

While Jake was in the shower I heard voices outside. I moved close to the door.

"Remember, you promised me," Leonor said, her voice low.

"I know what I promised," Evan snarled. "God, you never let me forget it." Their voices moved out of range.

I repeated what I'd heard to Jake. He didn't understand it either. Evan had told Jake that Sochi had never wanted to get married, they'd agreed to that right from the start; also, that Evan did not want any kids.

"Maybe the baby wasn't Evan's," I said.

"Oh, Jesus." Jake's look of horror sickened me. *Was it not an accident? Had he and Evan done something . . . ?*

By the time we'd both dressed I was pretty well cried out. "How come Evan didn't hear Tang when the rest of us did?" I asked.

"Earplugs. Also he takes sleeping pills."

I couldn't quit thinking about Sochi. Not a good way to get rid of somebody. Maybe it was a heat of passion thing. Or a struggle.

Jake was watching me. "Will you stop? We've got no way of knowing what happened. So could you for once in your life just not get involved?" I felt myself getting scared. Jake's reaction was wrong. He was too composed, almost resigned.

As we came out of our room Evan's door opened, as if he'd been waiting for us.

"Listen, you guys," he said. "Can you stick with me here? Just

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for a day or two?" He stopped and blew his nose. "Sorry. Sorry about this. Just unbelievable. They're sending a helicopter, my mother talked to somebody. You think I should go with her? Oh shit." We came together in a three-way hug.

Of course we'd stay, as long as he needed us.

At the bottom of the stairs a flash of yellow brightened the shadowed dining room, Sochi's poncho-covered body laid out on the dining table. How much did Jake know about what happened to her?

The smell of fresh coffee drew Jake into the kitchen. Through the window alongside the front door I saw Farley out on the terrace, scanning the vineyards with his binoculars. I shrugged into a slicker and went out.

"I can't stay away," I said, looking down at the spot where the body had been.

Farley nodded. "A terrible accident; terrible. The sheriff won't be happy that she's been moved, but Tang absolutely insisted. He would've done it alone."

I couldn't stop the pictures forming in my head. Was it quick? Did Sochi realize? No blood was visible. Maybe it had all washed away. Was her spirit still hanging around, unsatisfied? I waited, still, in case there was any kind of sign. But nothing came.

Farley showed me where part of Noni's Parcel had washed away, leaving a raw brown gouge in the hillside. I wondered who would inherit the land if something happened to Evan. Wasn't that why Sochi had died—because of the baby? Farley was certainly the next of kin.

When I glanced up at the balcony I saw a flash of red between the bottom rail and the concrete floor. I looked away quickly. I knew exactly what it was. Sochi had been wearing a big red clip in her hair; but I didn't remember seeing it down here, where she'd fallen.

I was hot to go and get the clip, but Farley kept on talking. Inside the house Tang shouted once, and Farley shook his head, smiling. "Tang and Sochi both loved to gamble. Stereotype, I know, but as it happens, true for him. She always took him over to Reno for his birthday. For a smart guy he's a terrible gambler—bets his hunches, astrological numbers, high and low temperatures, anything. She always wound up lending him money. He must be into her for thousands by now."

"So then, she could afford it." Maybe Sochi had struggled with somebody on the balcony, and the clip fell out. There might even be fingerprints.

"And she loved to stick it to him," Farley said. "'What, you lost again?' she'd say. 'Come on, you old gook, where's your Filipino pride? Let's see some of that Oriental cunning.'"

I smiled. So obvious what Farley was doing, even if what he said was true. When I finally got away and up to the balcony, the clip was gone. And if I'd found it—so?

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Everybody was at the breakfast table, except for Tang. He leaned against the back wall beside the burbling radio. Two separate mudslides: several people missing. We breakfasted on Froot Loops, Grape-Nuts Flakes, expired toaster waffles, half-thawed onion bagels, and bananas. In spite of everything, I was ravenous.

The phone was working intermittently. Farley gave us direct orders not to answer it. "The reporters will be on us as soon as they hear something."

"They're vultures. Maggots!" Leonor said. "I know all about that from my time with Tom. You don't dare give them a millimeter."

They slid into reminiscences about Sochi. Running away on her pony when she was ten, headed for the beach thirty miles away because her daddy promised her and couldn't go that day. Hiding her tattoo from her dad. And her flying lessons. "I taught her to play blackjack when she was six years old," Tang said.

"Ruben," Evan said, getting up. "We've got to call her dad."

Leonor pushed back her chair, blocking him. "Let somebody else take care of that."

"It's my job, isn't it?"

"You really don't want to do that," she said. "Too stressful."

"It's my life; remember?" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Hey-hey." Farley pointed to the radio. "Governor's declared Napa and Sonoma Counties disaster areas. Low-cost loans? Tax relief?"

"I wonder how much she'd had to drink," Leonor said. "She always liked her nightcap."

"Maybe not now," I said. "Being as she was pregnant."

"They'll be able to tell from the—examination, won't they?" Jake said.

"Alcohol in the blood dissipates," Leonor said.

"I went up to bed around eleven," Farley said, "and she went into the kitchen to play cards, right?" he asked Tang.

"Evan and I were shooting pool," Jake said. "Never saw her after dinner."

"We played five-card stud till one o'clock," Tang said. "Then she went upstairs. With all of you."

"Maybe it was some kind of wild impulse," Leonor said. "Even the weather can make people do things. We may never know."

I had an itch in my brain. All of them, even Tang, had some reason to want Sochi gone. I wanted to scream. "I keep seeing her, so clearly," I said. "In the flowered dress, with her hair piled up, and that big red clip with the curved teeth—come to think of it, I didn't see the clip this morning. I wonder what happened to it."

"I will go look in her room," Tang said.

"And I'll come and help," I said.

Farley looked uneasy. "Maybe we shouldn't move anything till the sheriff comes."

"Why not?" Leonor demanded. "This isn't television. We're talk-

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ing about a tragic accident, after all."

It didn't take long. Sochi's dresser drawers were nearly empty. Underwear, two nightgowns, heavy socks, sunscreen. In the closet, a couple of robes, a down jacket, ski clothes, old aviation and skiing magazines. No red hair clip.

Tang found a dusty suitcase and started packing, over my objections. I asked him about his gambling trips with Sochi, and he turned a red-eyed glare on me. "I don't have to explain anything to you," he said. "I knew her from a baby." His voice rose. "She showed me her report cards, every one. I'm like an uncle to her!"

"Hey, hey. Farley just happened to mention—"

"Farley," Tang sneered. "That's not even his real name." Which was Frank, from his father, Tomase Francisco. "When he was still in school he didn't like the dirty work; too hard. Had a big, big fight with his father, and changed it to Farley. Went down to Salinas to his mother's brother and raised artichokes. So then Tomase only gave him a little something in his will. Tom, that was Evan's father, got the whole thing.

"And then when Tom takes him back into the winery, what does Frank do? He steals from the company. That's embezzlement."

I looked toward the door, afraid we might be overheard. "Don't worry," Tang said. "He's sitting on his big butt watching some game and waiting for his next meal. You figure out why old Frank wants it that Sochi would jump?"

Of course. To get rid of the new heir.

Tang closed up the suitcase. "Now I have to burn it all."

"Why?"

"Sometimes the person's spirit gets lonesome for their own things, and comes back looking for them," Tang said. "As soon as they're burnt, she will have them with her, and she can be at peace."

I suggested he discuss it with Evan, but I don't think he heard me. "She gave him a present," he said, mostly to himself. "But he didn't want it."

The others were still in the kitchen. "No," I told them. "We didn't find the clip."

Everyone scattered, and the thumping of the treadmill started overhead. The weather continued showery and uncertain, with rivers of molten silver rushing downhill in the changing light. The green countryside stretching away was like a poultice for my fevered brain.

Toward noon, as I passed the sunroom, I saw through the two layers of glass Leonor, outside on the balcony. It seemed wrong, foolhardy to be in that fearsome spot. She was rubbing her hands back and forth along the iron railing. Wiping away possible fingerprints? The thought was a warning. Leonor was so easy to dislike that I couldn't trust my judgment of her.

Quivering, I walked out to her. "Mind if I join you? The air is so wonderful up here. In spite of everything."

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"Of course not. But I warn you, I'm not very good company."

I waited.

"I'm angry," she said. "I'm just so angry I can't stand myself. That that girl would do such a thing to Evan. Try to burden him with all that guilt."

"Then you don't think it was an accident."

"Absolutely not! It's a very common cause of suicide, you know. Revenge." Leonor leaned stiff-armed, looking down. "I'm just trying to get it straight in my mind," she said. "Just between us, I figure she must've been drunk. Or possibly hysterical. Even as a little girl she was strong-willed and impulsive, anybody will tell you that. I wonder now if she mightn't have been bipolar."

My expression of pleasant interest felt like a cardboard mask. Be fair, I urged myself. Maybe Sochi was given to wild impulses. "Tang is certainly broken up over it," I said. "Naturally."

"He seemed all right after dinner," she said. "You may have noticed that he goes off now and then. I kind of suspect some form of dementia, or possibly early Alzheimer's, because of his sudden mood changes. Fine one minute, the next—unbelievable. Like that stunt with your heater."

"What stunt?"

"In your room. Trying to burn up your bed, simple as that." She smiled, waiting for my reaction.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, we went into your bedroom to get the extra heater so I wouldn't totally congeal last night. When we left I looked back, and saw that he'd moved your lighted heater up against the bed." She shook her head. "I suppose he's feeling angry at these extra people to take care of. Anyway, I went and moved the heater out of harm's way." She shrugged. "Or who knows what might've happened."

We shook our heads and exchanged a few clichés about fate that neither of us believed, and Leonor marched off. Did the heater business actually happen that way? Maybe Tang went back again. It sounded crazy; but Leonor wouldn't much care if I believed her. Did she want Tang to seem out of control, and so a major suspect in case Sochi's death was questioned?

Wait a minute. Sochi was still alive then. Was Leonor thinking ahead, already worried that Evan might try some way to get rid of her? Now the craziness was infecting me, too.

The rescue helicopter arrived about two o'clock, the *thupa-thupa* growing deafening as it settled onto the gravel turnaround out front. The pilot was alone, and disgusted: He was on his way to check out a family of five believed stranded on the other side of Whiskey Creek, and clearly thought the living should preempt the dead. He hustled Sochi into a body bag, and we followed in silence as he and Evan carried her out. He couldn't say when the roads would be open. Expect a visit from the sheriff, he said, when they were.

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The house seemed somehow emptier. I wandered into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Tang was stirring a big pot of something spicy on the back of the stove. "Chili," he said. "Another storm coming."

I told Tang about our scorched bedding. "What I can't understand is, Leonor seems to think that you set the heater there on purpose."

"What did she say exactly?"

When I told him how Leonor described him moving the heater, he scowled as if in puzzlement or disbelief. "I don't know where she got the idea," I said. "You know how she is. Of course, I figured she was mistaken."

"Oh, yah. I know everything." Then a smile began and Tang straightened up, starting to look positively pleased. "I'm in charge of it now." He patted my shoulder. "You go ahead and forget the whole thing."

By late afternoon I was stir-crazy. Jake came down from Evan's room blinking like a disoriented owl, and I dragged him outside for a walk. Everything dripped and gurgled, streams and rivulets carved up the gravel paths and ate away the hillsides, and mud, mud everywhere. The air was intoxicating.

"How's Evan doing?"

He shrugged. "I left him watching cartoons."

"Think we can get out of here tomorrow?"

"No way." Jake stopped dead and brushed a lock of hair away from my cheek. I started to tell him what I'd found out from Farley, and about Leonor and the heater. I could see him getting furious.

"Always stirring the pot. Why can't you just let it be an accident?"

"Because I don't believe it, and neither do you! You know what they'll say: Evan did it."

"Listen," he said, "it's a whole lot worse than you think."

We turned and walked a few more steps. "He told me last night," Jake said. "You know the Calabresi Curse? There really is one. It's in the family. Genetic. Not a virus and not a bacteria—it's this weird element, a prion, that starts to develop at a certain point and trashes your brain. Fatal Familial Insomnia, it's called. FFI."

"Insomnia? Oh, come on—" I was appalled.

"Yes! It kills people."

I walked away from him and then back. "I can't stand this crazy talk."

"You see? That's why Evan never tells anybody. Because of exactly that reaction. First the laugh, total disbelief, and then finally the 'Oh you poor dumb bastard' look."

FFI. Evan had explained the whole thing to Jake. Runs in families, may not develop till as late as sixty, once it starts it can kill you in eighteen months. Same type of organism (only it isn't one) as Mad Cow disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, but even more rare. Evan even made Jake go on the Internet and see for himself. Jake showed me a printout.

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There are four stages of the disease before an individual's life ends. The first is progressive insomnia. . . . If homozygous for the mutation, = mean 9.1 months to fatality. . . . Not contagious. Only inherited. Always fatal, and so far, no cure.

"Who-all knows he's got it?" I asked.

"Everybody up there." Jake nodded toward the house. "Except Sochi." We looked at each other. "He knows he should've told her. She still believed the curse was nothing but superstition."

Somehow we got through the rest of the day. The televised news from the county seat described three known fatalities from the storm, but no names yet. "Tomorrow it starts," Farley said.

The pot of chili had scorched, you could smell it all over downstairs. We had cold duck sandwiches for supper, and a very good Riesling. Tang leaned against the back wall of the kitchen, smiling.

"This place," Leonor said to him. "When did you last get it cleaned, anyway? You must have a statement there someplace." She pointed at his piled-high desk. "You can't possibly find anything in that mess. Probably forgot to pay the bill."

Leonor put down her fork and went to rummage around on the desktop, and a pile started to slide. "Oops!" Papers cascaded onto the floor, and Sochi's red hair clip bounced free.

Farley groaned.

"Well." Leonor picked up the clip. "It was here all the time." Tang looked at her. Then he tipped his head back and chuckled to himself. Nobody spoke. I opened my mouth, and closed it again. I would wait and talk to the sheriff.

Jagged metal lightning, and then a terrible racket dissolved into a big dead bell tolling—I came awake sitting up and saw Jake the same, grabbing our robes and scrambling into slippers as the measured *CLONK, CLONK, CLONK* went on, and a man's voice shouted something, over and over. Jake opened the door and I smelled the smoke.

"Fire!" Tang was yelling. "Fire! Fire! Fire!" The dim hallway was already fogged and acrid and my nose and eyes stung. Farley was ahead of us on the stairs, and here came Evan, staring like a wild animal. Down the stairs as roaring and snapping bonfire sounds came from the bright glowing kitchen and the smoke billowed out, flowing toward the open double doors.

"It's climbing up," Tang yelled. "It's going for the attic."

"Where's my mother?" Evan shouted.

"She got out already." Tang pushed him toward the doors. "Go round to the barn, I told her. Quick! Go on, get out!" We ran down the wide steps into the cold dark and sloshed after Evan along the sodden path. Farley stood at the far edge of the wide gravel turnaround with both hands pressed to his chest, shouting something.

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When we turned the corner of the house I saw the barn looming out there dark and still, with only gleams of light reflected from the flames. Nothing moved. Behind us the roar of the fire grew.

"Mother?" Evan yelled. "Mom?" Evan whirled around and crashed past us running back toward the front of the house again. The whole kitchen end of the house was going up, windows glaring orange and the music of glass popping, the blaze barely contained in its stone cave.

"Where is she?!" Evan screamed.

"And where is Tang?" Farley called out. Evan ran up the steps to the front entrance, dark now, the doors closed. Through the tall side windows the back-lit smoke glowed in the hall rosy gold and weirdly beautiful, like angel hair.

"Oh my God." Evan grabbed the doorknob and yanked at it as the roaring beyond grew. The door was locked. "Mother? Tang? Open this door!" He threw himself against it, and then again, the noise of the fire drowning out his shouts.

The left-hand window shattered and fell soundlessly: Evan flinched away and then tried to climb through the broken window. Jake and I dragged at him to pull him away. The old dry walls flared like chaparral, the timbers shrieked and roared as they fell. The heat drove us all back.

Six weeks later Jake and I flew north again for the memorial service at the mission. Afterwards we walked with Evan across the sun-dappled plaza under a tender blue sky scattered with cloudlets.

"I want to tell you what happened with Sochi," Evan said. It wasn't necessary, I started to say, but he stopped me with a look. "Please?"

She was supposed to come to him last thing that night so they could talk; he waited with his door ajar. He heard her say goodnight to Tang and he shut his door, waiting. "Then I heard her out there talking to somebody. But after that—nothing." He looked at me and then away. "It was my mother. So then I figured my mother had managed to buy her off, and Sochi just went on to bed. God! If only I'd . . ."

"Stop it," Jake said. "It's done."

"Tang must've heard them together, too," Evan said, "and jumped to his own conclusions." A gust of wind ruffled our hair and pulled at our jackets, and my eyes stung. I figured Sochi had actually known about Evan's condition, and wanted his child anyway. I figured Tang would have told her.

"Funny." Evan smiled behind his dark glasses. "Mother made me promise I'd never kill myself. And now I'm the only one left." He raised both bandaged hands to the big old sycamores just starting to push out their bitter green buds. "Beautiful day, isn't it? Come on, I'll buy you guys coffee." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE KILLER WHO DISAPPEARED

by Richard Macker

The disused underground railway station lies within the great circle that makes up the city's center. It is many years since any suburban train stopped here. Now they rush past with their human load, rows of anonymous faces, deathly pale in the glare of the harsh neon light. The clattering of the wheels on the rail, steel upon steel, creates a deafening echo between the dirty grey concrete walls. Down here it's like some great, gloomy burial vault. But the corpses have long since been transformed to a dense, stinking dust. On the wall are the words "DOWN WITH FRANCO" painted in writing that once had the radical red tinge of current interest.

A clammy, biting November cold pervades this dreary hole. Nonetheless, here I stand—Jorunn Vindmo—and shiver in abject solitude. It's past one in the morning. The last trains have gone. I'm not waiting on anyone. I came here because something drew me here. I close my eyes, and for some seconds I hear the resonance of that terrifying scream from a young girl in fear of her life. I open my eyes again and see only the cold grey walls, and hear nothing but a charged stillness.

It is ten years to the very hour that Lilly Meinert's murder happened. A murder that only I know the truth of. The killer disappeared long ago. But still I don't go to the police with what I know. How could I ever be in a position to denounce Kjell Bakk, with whom I have been intimately linked for so many years, and whom I still think of with that mixture of deep affection and frenzied hatred? At one point we studied economics together at high school. It was a platonic relationship between us but an emotionally profound one nonetheless. His was a strange and tragic fate, but his imprint is still with me. Now and then he pitches up like a shadow in my dreams, a small dark-haired lad with restless motions; a boy with plenty of common sense but problems concentrating because of the conflicts that were always raging inside him.

Translated from the Norwegian by Jorunn and Michael Fergus ©2006.

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Lilly Meinert was in the class below us, doing social studies. She was the type of girl everyone knew about, although, because of her natural modesty, perhaps she would not have wanted it that way. Clichés such as "beautiful, charming, and charismatic" are not enough to capture her. I have never met a livelier human being. It was as if she had a small nuclear power station inside her—how else to explain the continual radiation that put such light into her big green eyes and such warmth into her graceful smile? Hers was a flashing, artistic intelligence, with a compelling talent for singing, dance, and drama. I often used to ask myself how it was that some individuals were gifted with everything by Nature. Besides, Lilly was an only child with well-educated and hard-working parents who did everything to make life easy for her.

Most of the boys in school were in love with Lilly Meinert. To display interest in her was a sort of necessity, a social demand, even where natural emotions for her were absent. She had just as great an appeal as the most beautiful movie stars of the time. Kjell Bakk could no more remain unmoved than could the other boys, despite the fearsome consequences it would have for them both.

But for Lilly there was only one boy—Stein Vangsvik. He was her male counterpart. And once more I have to wonder at Fate's random and strange apportionment of intellectual and artistic talents, charm and physical attributes. Stein Vangsvik was tall and well-built, with open, clean-cut features and blond curling hair. Of course he distinguished himself in sports. In addition, he was a brilliant pupil, firmly resolved to study economics. He was in my class, and of course he was elected School Captain.

Lilly and Stein. They were a catchword in those days. "Legendary" is the word used of this beautiful couple when old schoolmates gather. Lilly's fate evokes in us a profound fear of the evil that will exist as long as there are humankind. Lilly and Stein. What could they have achieved together if she had been allowed to live? Their future together was such a matter of course.

Other love affairs at school paled in comparison with that of Lilly and Stein. That's what happens when young people have idols they are seeking to emulate. Copies are never more than anemic imitations of the genuine article. We dressed like Lilly and Stein, we pursued the same interests, and we were willing to suppress our true selves to become like them. And of course I was madly in love with Stein Vangsvik; I dreamt he kissed me, made love to me, and afterwards lay in my arms as I caressed his blond curls. But in reality, to him I was completely invisible. He didn't even know that I existed. He only had eyes for Lilly. They fueled and fortified one another in a way that seemed to give them a double dose of energy and lust for life. Strangely enough, there was not a trace of superiority about them; they were easy to get along with and slow to find fault.

Then the terrible thing happened, on that bleak November

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evening ten years ago. Lilly and Stein had been to the late-night cinema. Lilly lived closer to the city center and she got off the train at exactly the station where I now stand. Even then the decision had been taken to close the station and the process of decline was under way. No one was more preoccupied with Lilly and Stein than Kjell Bakk, and he knew when and to which cinema they were going that night. He was waiting down here, hidden behind a projecting brick wall in the corner closest to the stairs. He had his ghastly plans ready. If she got off the train alone, and this was likely, he would kill her down here. If other passengers got off, then he would follow her and carry out the killing in a bleak passage she went through on her walk home. As it turned out, Lilly was surprisingly unafraid, despite the fact that the "Plastic Sack Killer" had committed his crimes only six months previously. Mind you, it was in another part of the city, but fear had spread out over the whole of the capital and even throughout that entire region of the country. But Lilly wasn't afraid.

The Plastic Sack Killer had raped and killed two young girls. He had stuffed the badly molested corpses into big black plastic sacks and dumped them in a roadside ditch on the outskirts of the city, probably from a car. The police had gotten nowhere with their investigations. Kjell Bakk was not the Plastic Sack Killer. I knew him well enough to say that with one-hundred-percent certainty. But he was intelligent enough to commit a murder on the same pattern. Suspicion would inevitably fall upon the person who committed the two previous crimes.

Ten years back. Through Kjell Bakk I know almost every detail of what happened. The train stops. Lilly Meinert gets off. She smiles and waves to Stein and blows him a kiss as the train leaves. Neither of them knows what is in store. They have been sitting excitedly discussing the film. Lilly is flushed and her cheeks are warm. She hurries along the grey platform. Her high heels clatter energetically on the concrete.

Just as she is about to take her first step up the stairs Kjell Bakk comes upon her from behind. Suddenly an arm is round her waist, another is on her mouth. With a fearsome force she is dragged backwards into the dark space below the stairs. For a few seconds she is able to pull herself free and catch a glimpse of the creepy, blurred face beneath the brown silk stocking. Then she cries out in fear of death. The next moment he knocks the back of her head against the concrete wall with the mad power of desperation. She crumples up, unconscious. And there she lies flat on her back, Lilly Meinert. Still so beautiful, rosy-cheeked and quivering with a life that might still be lived.

Ten minutes later she is no longer alive. I shall not say what Kjell Bakk did to her, but I know the physical and psychological reasons for what he did. He had never achieved intimate contact with any girl. He was incapable, and he didn't want to anyway.

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On the other hand, he was still very much a man and Lilly Meinert represented for him the ultimate in feminine beauty. He loved, he envied, and he hated her so much that she drove him, an unsure and sensitive youth, to become a bestial murderer.

Kjell Bakk killed Lilly Meinert to put a distance between himself and what he was.

The next day the first train runs over a plastic sack containing the dismal, maltreated corpse of Lilly Meinert. She had been desecrated, but not raped.

A few hours later the entire school knew what had happened. After the first shock came the ghastly paralysis. Our homes were filled with manic thoughts completely devoid of logic or realism. *No! No! It can't be true.*

Kjell Bakk is at school, apparently paralysed too. In the days that followed he was still Kjell Bakk in a physical sense, but psychologically, he was in the process of becoming a different, softer person. Softer, but firm and purposeful at the same time. He is about to accept that he is soon going to disappear, to be obliterated.

Who could ever suspect him? He often spoke and joked with Lilly Meinert. They were both interested in ballet. They performed together in the school show, and laughed together. Lilly had never done him any wrong. No, who would ever suspect Kjell Bakk?

The school principal gave a moving speech and could not restrain his tears. Then he allowed us to take the rest of the day off. Home to our grief. But Stein Vangsvik did not go home. He went to pieces and had to be taken in hand. Time and again, he muttered, "Why did I not take her home?"

Now, more or less the whole country is up in arms about the Plastic Sack Killer. The investigations intensify. Every technical and psychological tool is brought to bear. But without result. The first two murders are and will be a mystery for me, too. But I know the murderer in the third.

So here I stand, ten years after the deed. The thoughts flash through my mind. I try to conjure up Kjell Bakk and I see he slowly became sickly in the years that followed. And soon it is eight years since he vanished completely. He got his punishment. They put him on a couch, doped him, castrated him, and made deep incisions in him with their scalpels. And then he was no more.

It's soon half-past one in the morning. The light down here is as pale as death itself. This burial chamber should be filled in. Many people have demanded it. I go slowly along the platform, up the stairs, and into the still night street.

After a quarter of an hour I am home. There are lights on in the windows of the great old house. In the studio on the second floor I see something moving behind the flaming red drapes. Stein Vangsvik is walking to and fro there. I know that he is in the phase just before he begins a new painting. He only has two sub-

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jects: Lilly Meinert or the Plastic Sack Killer. Over the years he has been unable to paint anything but these two subjects. He, who was going to conquer the whole world! He paints and paints, but he is no great artist. With paints and brush he tries to bring Lilly to life again, but he always fails, and eventually casts the pictures aside in a rage. The Plastic Sack Killer is portrayed with the most grotesque features, and when Stein is through, he takes his vengeance for Lilly by slashing the painted faces with a long sharp knife.

No one but me can put up with him. Had it not been for me, he would have been put away in an asylum. I am the only one who can tackle him, calm him down. I have always loved him, and I always will. When he puts his head with those beautiful blond curls on my shoulder I reach the peak of happiness. I have bleached my own hair and made my nose smaller. I do my best to look like Lilly. More and more he thinks that I am her. Then he strokes my hair and my cheeks and he kisses me, and lets his beautiful hands slide over my breasts, which the surgeons have filled with silicone. Then he makes love to me, as he used to make love to Lilly. With outstanding skill the doctors have made me into a woman.

We have each other. Two wounded people in a world of deceit, fraud, and brutality. And I am the center of his life. It is the ultimate happiness for me. ●

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Ellery Queen September/October 2006

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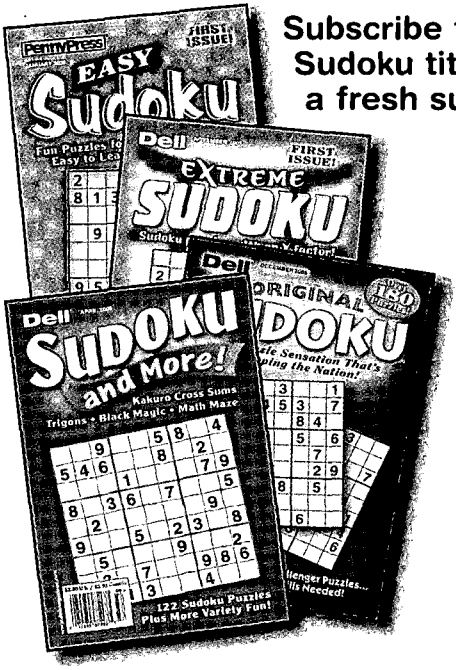

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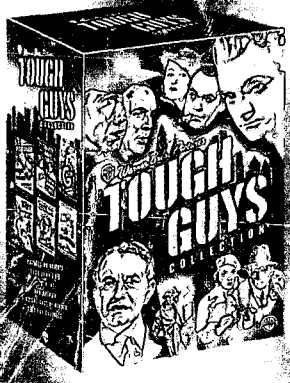

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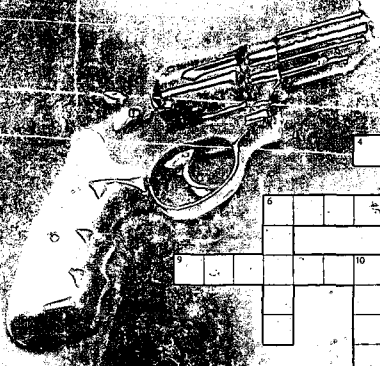

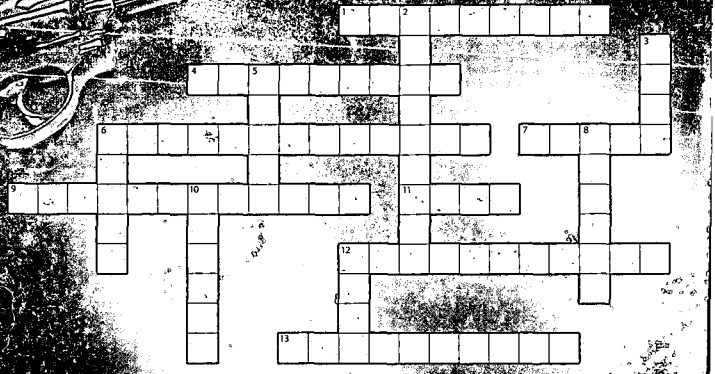

Across

1. Actor Starred In "Gilligan's Island" And "His Kind Of Woman"
4. An Important Event, A Stone Marker Or The Director Of "The Racket"
6. 1947 *Film Noir* Classic Based On Raymond Chandler's Book
7. Director Of "San Quentin" Or Kyra's Hubby Kevin
9. Nicknamed "Bink," Mark Cardigan In "*His Kind Of Woman*"
11. Bogart In "Bullets Or Ballots" Or _____ Bunny
12. Discovered By Howard Hughes As A Dental Receptionist, This Actress Was Originally Named Ernestine
13. Elizabeth In "Bewitched" Or Director/ Actor Robert In "Lady In The Lake"

Down

2. "Fantasy Island" Actor Who Starred In "*Border Incident*"
3. 1935 Movie Or Slang For F.B.I. Agent
5. One Who Avoids The Company Of Others
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